Introduction
The meteor's milieu

Repulsive virtue

The rhetoric of celebrity transforms a traditional cosmology of heavenly bodies into a secular cosmology of human bodies and social space. As the gods fall, the celebrity rises as the "'celestial' representative of society."[1] Byron's literary and social arrival with the publication of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* I–II in March 1812 was announced by "a circle of star-gazers whom I had left around him at some party on the preceding night," Thomas Moore recalls that such attentions were a "flattering ordeal he had to undergo wherever he went."[2] His publisher, John Murray, placed advertisements for *Don Juan* alongside notices of the Great Comet in July 1819; and necrologies of the star being dimmed greeted the news of Byron's death in April 1824. "Byron" – as work, life, and reception – is the initiating figure, allegory, and apocalyptic event of celebrity as secular divinity. Byron relocates the heavenly body from its natural and supernatural milieus to the social, political, and cultural worlds of Regency England and post-Napoleonic Europe.

In *Childe Harold* III's apostrophe to "Ye stars!," the stars themselves are allegorical forms, "the poetry of heaven!" in whose "bright leaves we would read the fate / Of men and empires," (*CH* III. 88. 824–5). The cosmological milieu hosts a temporal and affective drama of "reverence from afar":

> for ye are
> A beauty and a mystery, and create
> In us such love and reverence from afar,
> That fortune, fame, power, life, have named themselves a star.
> (*CH* III. 88. 829–32)

Rising from the fall also involves the drama of overleaping: "in our aspirations to be great, / Our destinies o'erleap their mortal state, / And claim a kindred with you;" (*CH* III. 88. 827–9). Byron's œuvre models a

rhetoric of fallenness, starlessness, chaos, and reconstitution, remodeling traditional anti-heroes as icons of political opposition.[3] Celestial, political, social, and psychic worlds are conjured through their spectacular ruination, as in *Cain* (1821), where Lucifer observes that the world is formed from chaos: "By a most crushing and inexorable / Destruction and disorder of the elements, / Which struck a world to chaos, as a chaos / Subsiding has struck out a world" (II. 2. 80–3).[4]

Celebrity culture articulates another connection between scientific materialism and religion. The meteor enters science in about 1800, when the Aristotelian study of celestial phenomena is replaced by the modern science of meteorology, and weather is now expelled from the realms of religion and superstition.[5] This moment coincides with the adoption of the meteor within the vocabulary of celebrity, together with star and comet, which have different scientific meanings but appear more or less interchangeably in this metaphorical usage. So, just as the study of fallen stars was replaced by the science of weather, the literal belief in astronomical phenomena as portents of heaven was displaced by the figurative sense of the star as a secular form of transformative agency.

Within this constellation, Byron, the celebrity as human meteor, inhabits a range of social, cultural, and political milieus as an authorial body, and conjures them by and as the worlds of the texts: the Whig aristocratic social circles of Holland House; the milieus of Regency print culture; cosmopolitan exile in Italy. Byron's milieu in *Don Juan* "alternately presents us with the gaiety of the ball-room, and the gloom of the scaffold," as the radical parodist William Hone remarked.[6] The shuttling of the work and the life amongst these milieus marks Byron's symbolic practice with a particular kind of mobility. Indeed, "mobility" itself is a Byronic keyword, which "may be defined as an excessive susceptibility of immediate impressions – at the same time without *losing* the past; and is, though sometimes apparently useful to the possessor, a most painful and unhappy attribute" (*CPW*, V, 769). Byron's self-fashioning is informed by this sense of mobility, at once sensationally contemporary and urgently inflected by the past.

Harnessing the energies of this fondness for mobility, Byron transforms a Newtonian theory of motion into a practice of social commotion. His social milieu enacts what Pierre Bourdieu defines as "a true milieu in the Newtonian sense, where social forces, attractions or repulsions, are exercised, and find their phenomenal manifestation in the form of psychological motivations such as love or ambition."[7] The story of Byron as life, work, and reception is the story of such social forces – and the poles of

attraction and repulsion, deification and outcasting, that inform the rites of scandalous celebrity. Enlightened monarchy and divine order were underwritten by orthodox Newtonians. Byron is associated with the radical Whig tradition that complicated Newtonianism by joining republicanism with scientific materialism and deism.[8]

A key feature of Byron's scandalous celebrity is the ambivalent circuit of attractions and repulsions that informs reading as a newly mobile activity of affective identification. We can understand this affective ambivalence in terms of the principle that Newton designated "repulsive virtue," which counteracted the attractive forces of gravity, magnetism, and electric charge. What marks this repulsion and attraction is the sheer mobility of bodies. Repulsive virtues modify the attraction of bodies in what Byron fulsomely calls in Canto X "a most natural whirl called 'Gravitation'" (*DJ* X. 1. 6). Margaret C. Jacob illuminates the historical impact of this "new push–pull metaphysics of bodies" that powers the Enlightenment: "A vast philosophical transformation in European thought occurred between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: nature was mechanized. Its bodies were atomized . . . They became simply, unrelentingly, matter in motion . . . [This] mechanical vision [was] the conceptual core of the Scientific Revolution."[9]

As with the repulsive virtue of bodies in motion, so too with the attractions of social bodies in motion. On New Year's Eve, 1819, Byron refers to the polite vice of the aristocratic Italian milieu of Ravenna in northern Italy, where he "was obliged to put on my armour and go . . . to the Marquis Cavalli's" with "the G," as he called his married lover, Countess Teresa Guiccioli:

> The G's object appeared to be to parade her foreign lover as much as possible – and faith – if she seemed to glory in the Scandal – it was not for me to be ashamed of it – nobody seemed surprised – all the women on the contrary were delighted with the excellent example. (*BLJ* 6: 262)

Such glorying in the scandal is a key feature of scandalous celebrity, and Byron's readers are drawn to the vice that Byron models. Aristocratic scandal and vice attract, particularly when they are purveyed in the form of vendible print. Forms and practices of print culture are infused with a new energy by the attraction of opposites. Canto X again: "And though so much inferior, as I know, / To those who, by the dint of glass and vapour, / Discover stars, and sail in the wind's eye, / I wish to do as much by Poesy" (X. 3. 21–4). Poetry, then, with its "paltry sheet of paper" (X.3.18) becomes a mode of scientific and freethinking discovery.

For orthodox commentators, Byron's appeal to nature and science sought to naturalize vice, as the *Critical Review* pointed out as early as 1813 in its review of *The Giaour*: "Boldly conjuring up a scene of moral devastation, he requires you to regard it as you would ... some past convulsion of nature, mysterious and unknown."[10] In his account of "Byronic casuistry," James Chandler argues that *Don Juan* "both creates and erases the structure of analogy between physical science and moral science" through its "emphatic resort to metaphors of mechanics."[11] The most famous metaphor of sexual mechanics is Canto X's allegory of Adam and Eve, which makes over Newtonian gravitational theory into an allegory of sexual gravitation.

Byron both deploys and displaces the Newtonian system when he ironically conjures with the figure of his fame. "Talking of vanity," he writes in a journal entry on December 7, 1813, "whose praise do I prefer?" He answers his own question and fantasizes about his intercontinental fame: "I like the Americans, because I happened to be in *Asia*, while the English Bards and Scotch Reviewers were redde in *America*. If I could have had a speech against the Slave Trade, in Africa, and an Epitaph on a Dog, in Europe, (i.e. in the Morning Post), my *vertex sublimis* would certainly have displaced stars enough to overthrow the Newtonian system" (*BLJ* 3: 236). Byron refers to his own lofty head or "*vertex sublimis*" in a reference to Horace's *Odes* ("With soaring head I'll strike the stars of heaven"). What Byron celebrates here is not only his own fame but also a particular feature of print culture, which is not dependent upon an embodied address from speaker to audience. He can be in Asia while his book is being "redde" in America. This mobility takes on a new significance with Byron's exile beginning in April 1816, when his relations with his readers are changed by the distance between Italy and England. Byron's exile intensifies this experience of print culture, for writers and readers, as a form of virtual presence and dramatic absence.

Celebrity culture is a culture of spectacular arrivals and departures, exiles, sightings, and "star-gazings" – like the sighting of the comet or witnessing of some supernatural event – hosting dramas of presence and absence. Caroline Lamb's response to being presented with Byron's calling card dramatizes the temporal quality of celebrity: "Should I go up to my room and tidy myself before confronting him as I was? No my curiosity was too great and I rushed in to be introduced to this portent."[12] Can a person be a portent? Already, Byron is a sensation, an event, a cultural field. Lamb's rushing in to be introduced suggests a foreshadowing of the future.

Visible invisibility

Byronic celebrity and Byronic exile are exemplary instantiations of the "visible invisibility" that Benedict Anderson associates with the "imagined community" enabled by print. In this sense, celebrity culture is one of the new social forms associated with Anderson's "print-capitalism."[13] Celebrity culture hosts the particular social relationships between author, text, and reader that are specific to print culture and its particular modes of virtual publicity. Producing the celebrity image as something distinct from the author, while also negotiating the "real" and the author's embodied presence, celebrity culture enacts a fascination with embodiment and presence that is predicated upon distance. This is precisely what Byron enjoys about being an author in Asia while being read in America.

The happy contingency of "happening" to "be" in one place while being "redde" in another also informs the textual practice of allusion, which is a form of referring beyond the text to an elsewhere. Byron's allusion to Horace's *Odes* (*BLJ* 3: 236) enacts Byron's scorn for reference ("My Muse despises reference" *DJ* XIV. 54. 430), functioning obliquely and indirectly, as is allusion's wont. Patricia Fumerton's apt distinction elucidates: "The notion that language is referential is in economic terms a market notion. A name 'stands for' something as if a contract were drawn between signifier and signified. By contrast, allusion deflects direct reference: at best there exists but a mediated and uncontracted (or unnegotiated) chain of reference between names. This is what makes allusion a resource for the kind of 'gifted' language we ordinarily account to the 'literary'."[14] Byron's language is both allusive and resourceful in its allusiveness. It is highly literary, even in the letters and journals that provide an epic paratext of everyday life to Byron's grandly negligent poetic œuvre. Allusion's playground of sophisticated wordplay and linguistic ingenuity is not always the high ground of literary aesthetics but often the low ground of the ludic, as Moore's "jesting allusions" to Byron's "circle of star-gazers" remind us, or as the levelled ground of Hone's demotic yet highly intricate literary-political parodies demonstrates with such brilliance and force.

Byron opposed the market notion of language, but he also opposed pious and transcendent conceptions of the literary. His allusive language can also be read as an "escape" from an overly circumscribed and formalized literary language:

> But then the fact's a fact – and 'tis the part
> Of a true poet to escape from fiction

> Whene'er he can; for there is little art
> In leaving verse more free from the restriction
> Of truth than prose, unless to suit the mart
> For what is sometimes called poetic diction,
> And that outrageous appetite for lies
> Which Satan angles with, for souls, like flies.
> (*Don Juan* VIII. 86. 681–8)

This reference to "the mart" of "poetic diction" dramatizes the fraught status of the literary in Byron's work. By suggesting how poetry functions as a commodity, Byron complicates the distinction between the literary and the commercial. Rather than claiming Byron's reference to the "mart" of "poetic diction" as an attempt to elevate literature beyond the marketplace, I argue that Byron resists any such conception of the literary as a hygienically separate space. Byron occupied an intimately conflicted if constitutive relation to the institution of literature that was emerging in this period.

In his own perverse formulation of literary worldliness, Jacques Derrida claims that "this strange institution of literature" is "the most interesting thing in the world, maybe more interesting than the world, and this is why, if it has no definition, what is heralded and refused under the name of literature cannot be identified with any other discourse. It will never be scientific, philosophical, conversational."[15] Maybe not. But what is so interesting about Byron's literary world is that it so strenuously networks (even if it will never *be*) the scientific, philosophical, and conversational; precisely by relaying these discursive networks does Byron's literary discourse constitute itself, I argue, through a form of worldliness that both repels and is heralded by the institution of literature.

Byron's figure of the "mart" of poetic diction exemplifies the epic cynicism that inspired John Ruskin to exclaim nostalgically of his "teen period" reading of Byron: "I rejoiced in all the sarcasm of 'Don Juan'."[16] Nothing could distinguish Byron's work more emphatically from Percy Bysshe Shelley's than its persistently, energetically cynical references to writing, scribbling, and poetry. Shelley produces utopian visions of poetic vocation and the figure of the poet, as in the *Defence of Poetry* (comp. 1820): "Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world" and "Poets are . . . the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present."[17] Byron, on the other hand, sarcastically associates "poetic diction" with that "outrageous appetite for lies."

Byron also relishes what Goethe called the "unpoetical." Goethe's friend Johann Eckermann noted admiringly that Byron "is not very scrupulous

whether an object is poetical or not; but he seizes and uses all just as they come before him, down to the wigs in the haircutter's window, and the men who fill the streetlamps with oil." Goethe agreed: "no real object is unpoetical, if the poet knows how to use it properly."[18] These were some of the contemporaries who recognized – and celebrated – Byron's resistance to the conventions of the literary institution, which occurred at the very moment of the institution's emergence.

The early twentieth-century American critic J. F. A. Pyre joked that "The professional artist as such [Byron] despised. . . . One of the chief sources of his aversion for Wordsworth was the smugness with which (as he saw it) that poet assumed the role of professional good man and priestly bard."[19] Pyre echoes Ruskin on the bracing effects of Byron's negativity: "[Byron's] sense of the unsatisfactoriness of life is in itself recreative. . . . The total effect is not that of despair but of defiant will."[20] This distinction between despair and defiance is vital; and it is a dynamically *re-creative* form of satirical self-reflexivity that marks Byron's relation to the emergent literary institution – and to life, the world, and everything (to use a suitably hyperbolic term). This re-creativity sustains Byron's hold upon modernity well past his original moment of vogue and notoriety as professional bad man.

In this study, celebrity features as the centerpiece of a socialized analysis of the literary institution. This understanding of celebrity as a mode of sociality occurs alongside an understanding of publication as a social event, and of print culture and literature as social institutions. I am concerned with the kinds of publics and modes of publicness enabled by printed texts, and with how Byron's texts imagine publics and enable identifications across these new technological, social, and affective domains. Such an approach, as Andrew Franta argues compellingly in his study of Romantic publicity, involves "the reconceptualization of the very nature of textuality," repudiating an "expressivist aesthetics" and considering textual "effects" rather than authorial intention.[21] Unlike Franta, however, who "offers no account of the literary as such," I seek to foreground the literary by analysing it as an institution.[22]

In understanding the status of the printed text as a mode of publicity, I take up Michael Warner's claim that "The making of publics is the metapragmatic work taken up by every text in every reading."[23] A corollary is that the making of publics, like the making of stars and celebrities, is a communal process. The authorial image, to adapt Richard Dyer's remarks on the star image, includes "what people say or write about him or her, as critics or commentators, the way the image is used in other contexts such

as advertisements, novels, pop songs, and finally the way the star can become part of the coinage of everyday speech."[24] Crucially, this authorial image is not the author's exclusive property, however much an author might attempt to control it.

That is to say, Byron's celebrity is not ultimately about Byron's ego or vanity or intention, even at those moments when he rhetorically performs this "vanity" or attempts to control his image, as he did when he commissioned portraits or demanded that others be destroyed. In fact, celebrity is more aptly identified with the paradigmatically alienated self. Byron's iconic statement, "I awoke one morning and found myself famous," rings with the pathos of the commodified self: to find oneself is to be distant from that self at that very moment of discovery.[25] Byron's central imbrication within Regency culture, politics, and scandal happens not – or not only – by authorial design, but by the force and contingency of circumstance.

Writing of "the visual discourse of Byron's celebrity," Mole illuminates the constitutive paradox of celebrity culture by which soliciting the gaze of a wider audience means losing control over how one is represented: "Byron's image circulated so widely because it rapidly escaped his control. Byron permeated Romantic visual culture not just because these paintings were faithfully reproduced, but also . . . because their image of Byron was appropriated, altered, improved, rethought, varied or transformed."[26] Such appropriations and transformations are not just side-effects of celebrity culture, but its active constituents as a communal culture of productive reception.

Ritual practice

Celebrity culture can be understood as a form of ritual, the term for an institutional field that joins cultural meanings and social practice. Ritual is particularly useful for analyzing celebrity because both shuttle between the social and cultural domains. Here, I take my cues from the symbolic interactionism pioneered by Erving Goffman, which views ritual as a mode of symbolic behavior. As Goffman puts it, ritual, "however informal and secular, represents a way in which the individual must guard and design the symbolic implications of his acts while in the immediate presence of an object that has a special value for him."[27]

Ritual illuminates two interrelated paradoxes of celebrity culture: first, its apprehension and processing of the extraordinary through the everyday, and, second, its status as a form of profane divinity.[28] Like celebrity

culture, ritual is ordinary, repetitive, and mundane, on the one hand, and, on the other, extraordinary and emotionally charged.[29]

Ritual provides a framework for understanding social genre, and for negotiating intensity and transformation in the field of the expected and generic. Ritual links culture and aesthetics to social affects such as indignation, shame, and adoration. One of ritual's primary functions is to organize transition through rites of passage.[30] I use ritual to conceptualize these elements of the sacred and the special that are part of the everyday of modernity, as well as the "rituals of social magic" specific to literary enchantment, to use Bourdieu's term.[31]

Émile Durkheim offers a particularly suggestive formulation for thinking about celebrity as a mode of divinity when he claims that "rites are the rules of conduct which prescribe how a man should comport himself in the presence of . . . sacred objects."[32] So too does Margaret Mead, referring to the secular, the sacred, and the affective: "Ritual has an extra degree of intensity. Such intensity may be due simply to the fact that the behavior pattern is a contact between the secular and sacred, or that it has high affective tones, such as death compared with an ordinary parting."[33] Byron's poetry is particularly fond of cultivating the "high affective tones" that distinguish death from ordinary parting – fond too of complicating such distinctions, as Paul Elledge has amply demonstrated.[34] Such intensity characterizes celebrity culture, and the category of ritual speaks to its intensely affective features. Intensity is a Byronic keyword, as Hazlitt noted disapprovingly: "*Intensity* is the great and prominent distinction of Lord Byron's writings. . . . His only object seems to stimulate himself and his readers for the moment – to keep both alive, to drive away *ennui*."[35]

As ritual is a communal form of public culture, the history of publicity can be told through the story of celebrity. In understanding celebrity as a form of publicity, I locate it in relation to the shift away from the "representative publicness" of the *ancien régime* to the modern democratic forms of publicity that Jürgen Habermas theorizes in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*.[36] In particular, I argue that celebrity can be understood as a form of what Lauren Berlant calls "intimate publicity" or "the intimate public sphere."[37]

The emergence of celebrity culture is a vital part of the social transformation that occurs with the move from *ancien régime* to democratic liberal modernity. Celebrity culture develops against aristocratic forms of representative publicity, display, and spectacle, but involves its own culture of distinction. The repertoire of social performances that Goffman analyses in

The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life (1959) involves a new vocabulary of ritual, where the courtly forms of earlier cultures are still present in ghostly, residual form in the rituals of bourgeois modernity.

As ritual looks to the past, so it looks to the future. As Judith Butler claims, "The 'moment' in ritual is a condensed historicity: it exceeds itself in past and future directions, an effect of prior and future invocations that constitute and escape the instance of utterance."[38] Such excess gives ritual a power of anachronism, of projecting into the past or the future, that aligns it with allegory.

A key contention of this study is that the emergence of celebrity culture is intimately related to the historical transition from material to symbolic violence, most clearly seen in the waning of public punishment. Jeremy Bentham, the Regency law reformer, attacked public punishment as a form of retributive justice linked to a vindictive desire for spectacle. So too, I contend, does celebrity culture involve spectacle and ritual, engaging in what Bourdieu calls "symbolic violence."[39] In traditional cultures, violent social rituals are understood as forms of "ritual distinction."[40] In modern celebrity culture, ritual humiliations can be seen to perform the same function as rites of transformation.

In correlating the waning of public punishment with the emergence of celebrity culture, I suggest that celebrity culture creates virtual publics and affective arenas for staging rites of devotion and celebration, but also of violence and degradation. This assemblage of practices constitutes the rites of scandalous celebrity. Scandalous celebrity hosts rituals that dramatize risk, enable scenarios of degradation, and generate a cycle of transgression and forgiveness. These rituals include profoundly ambivalent social and discursive practices such as blackmail, blasphemy (and its prosecution), degradation and status-stripping, public shaming, scapegoating, imagining the author's death, redemption bids, ritual humiliation, sacrilege, scarification, *Schadenfreude*, and other rites of "psychic violence," as Jacqueline Rose calls celebrity affect. By exploring rites of scandalous celebrity as rites of violence, I seek to analyze the ambivalence that informs celebrity affect, and to explore Rose's insight that "There is . . . something murderous in our relation to celebrity."[41] This "something murderous" speaks to how the material and symbolic domains are connected and underwrite one another.

Scandalous celebrity hosts rituals that effect a transition from crime to transgression by making claims for the autonomy of literature as a space for representing what was previously thought unrepresentable. Here again the category of ritual is useful for understanding the performative dimensions