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978-0-521-88477-8 - Romanticism and Celebrity Culture, 1750-1850

Tom Mole

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Introduction

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In Dinah Mulock Craik's 1856 novel *John Halifax, Gentleman*, a real celebrity from over half a century before makes a fleeting but decisive fictional appearance. John and his friend Phineas are tempted by a strolling player they meet on the road to visit the theatre in their local town. A crowd blocks the street outside the theatre and, as a sedan chair makes its way towards the entrance, one of the bearers is knocked down in the crush. '[I]n the midst of the confusion, a lady put her head out of the sedan, and gazed around her':

It was a remarkable countenance; once seen, you could never forget it. Pale, rather large and hard in outline, an aquiline nose – full, passionate, yet sensitive lips – and very dark eyes. She spoke, and the voice belonged naturally to such a face. 'Good people, let me pass – I am Sarah Siddons.'¹

In his brush with the celebrated actress, Phineas, who narrates the novel, shifts his attention from her face to her voice and then to her name. The face is recognisably the one depicted in Joshua Reynolds's 1784 portrait of Siddons as the tragic muse (Phineas calls her 'a veritable Queen of Tragedy'). Robyn Asleson has documented the importance of portraiture in shaping perceptions of Siddons, and Martin Postle has argued that Reynolds was a key figure in shaping the emergent celebrity culture.² The voice was repeatedly invoked in discussions of Siddons's celebrity identity, as Judith Pascoe has shown.³ And the name had a power of its own. Although few, if any, in the crowd had seen Siddons perform, her name and her image had been circulated through the recently industrialised print culture to such an extent that the crowd behaved as if they knew her already. When they heard her name, '[t]he crowd divided instantaneously, and in moving, set up a cheer that must have rang through all the town'.⁴ The crowd are not cheering their appreciation for Siddons's performance – she hasn't even reached the theatre yet. Instead, they are acknowledging the fact that her fame precedes her, thanks to a mediated identity which reached the provinces long before Siddons herself arrived.

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That cheer rings through nearly two hundred years since Siddons's retirement from the stage in 1812 (she returned briefly in 1815–16), reminding us how much our modern, media-saturated culture of celebrity has in common with the fame cultures of the past. But while we live in a culture obsessed by celebrity, until recently there has been little discussion of celebrity culture's history. This collection of essays brings together scholars from a variety of disciplines whose shared aim is not simply to show that there were celebrities in the Romantic period, but to trace the emergence of a recognisably modern celebrity culture. Celebrity was from the beginning a multimedia phenomenon whose cultural pervasiveness – in literature and the theatre, music and visual culture, fashion and boxing – overflows modern disciplinary boundaries and requires scholars with different kinds of expertise to collaborate. The essays in this volume therefore combine interdisciplinary breadth with historical specificity. They assemble a diverse cast of subjects: authors, composers, painters, soldiers, actors, journalists, boxers, dandies, critics, commonplacers, wannabes and fans. But they all focus on a historical period that, we contend, witnessed a slow, diffuse, but significant shift in the nature of fame.

In 1751 Samuel Johnson recalled in *The Rambler* a time when he 'did not find [him]self yet enriched in proportion to [his] celebrity'. He used the word to name a desirable personal attribute for the professional man of letters. A century later, in 1849, one of the characters in Dinah Mulock Craik's first novel, *The Ogilvies*, asked another, 'Did you see any of those "celebrities", as you call them?'⁵ Using a form of the word that was evidently still unfamiliar, Mulock (as she then was) employed it as a concrete noun. The Romantic period witnessed the transition between Johnson's usage and Mulock's, when the noun concretised, becoming an individual's definitive condition. Celebrity was no longer something you had; it was now something you were. But even as it emerged, celebrity came to be understood as a distinctly inferior variety of fame. William Hazlitt distinguished between 'fame' and 'popularity' in his lecture 'On the Living Poets' (1818). 'Fame is the recompense not of the living, but of the dead', he asserted, 'for fame is not popularity, the shout of the multitude, the idle buzz of fashion, the venal puff, the soothing flattery of favour or of friendship; but it is the spirit of a man surviving himself in the minds and thoughts of other men, undying and imperishable'.⁶ Critics have only recently stopped repeating Hazlitt's dismissive assumptions about celebrity culture, allowing the cultural history of celebrity to emerge as a new area of interdisciplinary enquiry with the potential to reshape our understanding of Romantic fame, as well as to connect the Romantic period to our own cultural moment.

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Our approach to celebrity has been shaped by a number of critics writing on contemporary celebrity culture. Richard Dyer, Alexander Walker and Francesco Alberoni pioneered the study of film stars, while Daniel Boorstin influentially attacked celebrity as recognition without substance.⁷ Joshua Gamson, Tyler Cowen, P. David Marshall, Graeme Turner, Chris Rojek and Ellis Cashmore have all offered sociological, economic or cultural studies perspectives on contemporary celebrity, drawing their examples from film, popular music, television and the Internet.⁸ Recent collections of essays such as *Framing Celebrity*, edited by Su Holmes and Sean Redmond, have gathered new work in this area, and the massive *Celebrity Culture Reader*, edited by Marshall, is an important milestone in the emergence of celebrity as a new object of interdisciplinary study.⁹ Literary celebrity in the twentieth century has been examined by Joe Moran, Loren Glass and Aaron Jaffe, while Neal Gabler and Charles L. Ponce de Leon both argue for the emergence of celebrity in twentieth-century human-interest journalism.¹⁰ These commentators all share Richard Schickel's 'first basic assumption' that 'there was no such thing as celebrity prior to the beginning of the twentieth century'.¹¹

Recently, however, a number of critics – including several contributors to this volume – have argued for a longer view of celebrity culture's history. Leo Braudy's 1986 book *The Frenzy of Renown* surveys attitudes towards fame from Alexander the Great to Marilyn Monroe, but Braudy claims that fame is a 'constant theme in the history of Western society' and he acknowledges no decisive break inaugurating modern celebrity.¹² In the two decades since Braudy's book appeared, critics have increasingly argued for an epistemic break, occurring before the twentieth century, between earlier kinds of fame and modern celebrity culture. Investigating late nineteenth-century celebrity, Richard Salmon has cited as evidence the proliferation of photographs, the rise of interviewing as a journalistic form, a tendency to conduct interviews in the subject's home and the fashion for authors to give public readings.¹³ Film historians studying Sarah Bernhardt (1844–1923) have argued for her importance as a transitional figure between theatrical and cinematic celebrity.¹⁴ Lenard R. Berlanstein has examined gendered aspects of celebrity in the nineteenth-century French press and Claire Brock has drawn attention to the 'feminization' of fame in the Romantic period.¹⁵ Frank Donoghue and David Higgins have argued for the importance of periodical writing to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literary celebrity.¹⁶ Peter M. Briggs has considered Laurence Sterne's celebrity strategies of self-promotion, and I have examined the career of Lord Byron in the context of celebrity culture.¹⁷ Cheryl Wanko has examined the fascination with the private lives of actors in the eighteenth century, and Mary Luckhurst and

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Jane Moody have suggested that theatrical celebrity can be traced back to 1660.¹⁸ Despite this groundswell of interest, this is the first volume of essays focused specifically on celebrity culture in the Romantic period in Britain.

Celebrity appears in this collection of essays as a varied but coherent cultural apparatus, with both material and discursive elements. The collection has four sections. In the first section, Jason Goldsmith, David Higgins and Richard Salmon examine some of the discourses and practices from which celebrity emerged, and in relation to which it was defined. In an effort to move beyond biographical approaches which mystify the agency of a celebrated individual, these chapters do not focus on particular individuals, but examine the material and discursive conditions of possibility that produced a recognisably modern celebrity culture.

In the second section, Benjamin Walton, Peter M. Briggs and Heather McPherson pursue celebrity into several different areas of cultural production, taking examples from music, sport and the theatre respectively. The case studies in this section suggest that, while each field generates its own form of celebrity, there are sufficient similarities between them to suggest that celebrity emerged more or less simultaneously in several cultural locations.

In the third section, Clara Tuite, Linda Zionkowski and I investigate the gendered nature of celebrity culture. Here we see the extent to which celebrity culture functioned to define and enforce gender norms, both male and female, and whether the individual celebrities exemplified or transgressed those norms.

In the final section, Cheryl Wanko, Corin Throsby and Judith Pascoe turn to the audience which sustained celebrity culture. They show that celebrity's consumers were never simply passive recipients of cultural messages, but were active participants in the construction of celebrity culture, busily engaged in appropriating celebrity texts for their own purposes and producing texts of their own in response. Relating to a celebrity in a particular way could reinforce group identities, signal political allegiances and underwrite claims of cultural distinction. Focusing on fans at the end of the collection reveals celebrity culture to be neither the reward of supremely gifted individuals, nor simply the product of a cynically manipulative culture industry, but the collaborative construction of individuals, entrepreneurs and audience members. In her study of Sarah Siddons's fame-struck sister Ann Hatton, Judith Pascoe assesses the cultural fallout of a moment in British history when fame became an end in itself.

As a whole, the volume consolidates the advances already made in this field, argues for the importance of celebrity culture to an understanding of this period, and aims to set the terms of debate for the future.

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Paying attention to the careers of Coleridge, Byron, Wordsworth, Clare and Hogg, Jason Goldsmith opens the present volume by inviting us to consider the connections between the rise of celebrity culture and the rise of modern national consciousness. The industrialised print culture of the early nineteenth century produced the 'imagined communities' that Benedict Anderson locates at the origins of modern nationalism, but it also circulated the information and images that sustained an emerging celebrity culture.¹⁹ Goldsmith addresses the connections between these two cultural shifts. Describing celebrity as 'an extensive, industrialised, and inter-textual mode of gossip, disseminating information, facilitating identifications, channelling desires, defining relations within a community, proscribing behaviours, and legitimating values', he argues that, rather than looking to an imagined past to consolidate national identity, celebrity culture provided a way to focus and negotiate national identity in the present. One of his examples is an engraving of George Hayter's painting of the Duke of Wellington visiting the waxwork of Napoleon at Madame Tussaud's. It suggests the importance of print to sustaining celebrity culture (the painting was destroyed, but it survives in extensively circulated prints), celebrity's multimedia dimensions (this is an engraving of a painting of a waxwork), and its links with commercial enterprise (reproductions of the painting helped to advertise Tussaud's 'museum', where the original hung). But it also suggests the extent to which the nationalist cult of Wellington was connected to popular modes of constructing and circulating celebrity identities. For Goldsmith (as for Heather McPherson in her essay), such products of celebrity culture are best understood as what Pierre Nora has called *lieux de mémoire*: realms of memory through which, on the one hand, the national past is renegotiated in the present and in which, on the other hand, the present is memorialised as the past of the future.²⁰ Goldsmith thus reveals the extensive cross-fertilisation between high-cultural discourses of heroism and low-cultural practices of celebrity promotion.

A similar set of tensions animates David Higgins's essay on the discourses of celebrity and genius, which competed but often overlapped. Reading the writings and reception of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Hazlitt and Clare alongside those of lesser-known figures such as Thomas Busby and Robert Montgomery, Higgins explores the ways in which Romantic period writers theorised the interplay of genius and celebrity. A key element of the discourse of genius was the claim that true greatness paid no heed to the strategies of self-promotion employed in the marketplace for literature. However, as Higgins shows, the discourse of genius could itself be pressed into service by periodical writers as an effective marketing tool both for the

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poets they approved of and for the magazines in which they wrote. When, as Higgins puts it, 'rejection of the market becomes itself highly marketable', the distinction between genius and celebrity becomes imperilled. In the modern age of celebrity, every celebrity seemed to be a genius, while true geniuses had to endure the indignity of being puffed like the latest fashionable celebrities. The effort to represent lasting, worthwhile genius and transient, meretricious celebrity as mutually exclusive was further complicated by the example of Byron, who seemed to exhibit aspects of both.

The culture of literary lionism is examined by Richard Salmon. Neither simply a subset of celebrity culture, nor one of the discourses it was defined against, the phenomenon of lionism, argues Salmon, is a stage in the transition into the modern culture of fully mediated celebrity. Virtually co-extensive with the nineteenth century, lionism was largely unknown before the 1800s or after the 1890s. It emerged as a social pastime in which society hostesses, known as lion-huntresses, would compete to secure the presence of male literary stars, known as lions, at their parties. The attraction for the other partygoers seems to have been less the chance to *talk to* the lion, than the chance to *look at* him. The practice of lionism was therefore gendered in perhaps unexpected ways, with female social impresarios setting up male authors as the object of the (female) audience's gaze. On the one hand, the social practice of lionism remained relatively unmediated in character, predicated on encountering the lion in the flesh. On the other hand, lionism's privileging of the visual survey – which derived from the touristic pastime of seeing the lions in the Tower of London, and endorsed the contemporary interest in physiognomy – made its subjects suitable for representation in printed matter that could be circulated far beyond exclusive social circles. These visual and verbal representations enabled a form of mediated lionism that fed into a recognisably modern celebrity culture.

The discourses and practices of celebrity, then, derived from a matrix of overlapping and contested phenomena, including heroism, genius and lionism. As the apparatus of celebrity acquired its own vocabulary, it began to inflect established forms of public distinction in new ways. A kind of personal fame for military achievements, as Leo Braudy argues, dates back to Alexander the Great. But, as Jason Goldsmith's essay suggests, the celebrity of Wellington or Napoleon differed from earlier kinds of fame in several respects. In its mediation through industrialised culture, in its branding of the individual's identity and in its intense fascination with a radically privatised subjectivity, celebrity retooled earlier kinds of distinction for a modern media-saturated age. The spectacular performance

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of monarchical power dates back at least to Elizabeth I, but George III is arguably the first monarch to have also been a celebrity, as daily newspaper reports on his health and innumerable caricatures recast the public fascination with his role as monarch into a public fascination with his existence as an embodied and all-too-fallible individual. Celebrity also operated retroactively, by reimagining historical figures as celebrities. David Garrick's Shakespeare jubilee in 1769 effectively made Shakespeare into a celebrity, by idolising him as a national Bard, while neglecting to quote any of his poetry.²¹ Edmund Malone's 1790 edition of Shakespeare's works, as Margreta de Grazia has argued, marked a tendency to conceive the playwright as a fully individuated artist.²² This tendency produced a revival of interest in the sonnets (which George Steevens had excluded from his 1773 edition altogether) and speculations about their autobiographical character.²³ It was summed up by Wordsworth's 1827 poem 'Scorn not the sonnet', which claims that 'with this Key / Shakespeare unlocked his heart'.²⁴ The Romantic tendency to reread the past through the lens of celebrity culture – to behave as though there had always been celebrities – may have helped to obscure the origins of celebrity from modern critics.

Those origins have also been obscured by the fact that celebrity arose in several cultural locations almost simultaneously, which makes it difficult for any scholar trained in a single discipline to see all parts of the phenomenon. Rather than engaging in arguments about priority, this collection draws on expertise in several areas to build up a synoptic picture of celebrity as a multimedia phenomenon. Each area developed its own vocabulary – from literary lions, to theatrical stars, to musical virtuosi, to sporting champions – but they each participated in the same large cultural shift towards a modern way of being well known. Benjamin Walton's account of the English reception of Gioachino Rossini suggests that the nationalist aspects of celebrity culture identified by Goldsmith co-existed with, and to some extent depended on, the international distribution of culture. Thanks in part to technological changes in the production and dissemination of music and in part to a musical style that combined catchy melodies with rhythmic energy and percussive orchestration, Rossini's music rapidly acquired a following throughout Europe and beyond. In a key distinction from earlier kinds of recognition, celebrities could mobilise a multinational culture industry, and begin to attract international acclaim in their own lifetimes. Musicians such as Rossini, authors such as Scott and Byron, actors such as Garrick (who was fêted in France in 1764) and even philosophers such as Rousseau (who visited England in 1766, where, according to Horace Walpole, he made a 'public exhibition of himself') could become internationally acclaimed.²⁵

But the brouhaha that surrounded Rossini's operas reminds us that acclaim is not the whole story of celebrity. Dinah Mulock Craik's novel presents an idealised picture when it imbues the voice of the celebrity with the power to turn an obstreperous mob into an obsequious crowd. Despite the puffs of his supporters – most notably Stendhal – Rossini's music remained controversial, and it was partly this controversy that lent it such wide cultural currency. Celebrities structure public discourse by their ability to divide as much as to unite their audiences; they provide a topic about which everyone can have an opinion. Discussion of 'Rossini' continually slipped from the music to the composer, but the man himself was difficult to pin down. Where some spectators expected a Romantic artist in the Beethovenian mode, they encountered a showman more likely to employ humour than pathos. Rossini thus became a battleground for debates about the relationship of genius to celebrity, of artistry to showmanship, of high to low culture.

A similar nexus of high and low is explored in Peter M. Briggs's essay on the boxer Daniel Mendoza. Boxing matches in the Romantic period were a place where individuals from different classes could meet and mingle; and Mendoza represented an enthusiasm for the sport as compatible with gentility by comparing boxing to fencing. As a celebrity boxer, he occupied a complex social position. He moved quite freely among the upper classes – he had an audience with the king and went fox hunting with dukes – and yet he never cast off his lower-class identity. Indeed, the characteristic that rendered Mendoza socially marginal – his Jewishness – was also decisive for his branded identity. He embraced the moniker 'Mendoza the Jew' and his matches were promoted as contests of Jew versus Christian. Mendoza's celebrity was grounded in his prowess in the ring, but it extended far beyond the audiences for his bouts, thanks to an extensive, multimedia promotional campaign, only partially under his control, in which prints, souvenirs, theatrical performances and newspaper journalism all played their part. This kind of multimedia exposure in material culture is shared by celebrities from very diverse fields, and the analysis of these artefacts provides important data for the cultural history of celebrity. Although the reason for Mendoza's celebrity was his boxing, then, the forms of his celebrity can be found in print culture and the theatre. At the height of his fame, Mendoza performed sparring demonstrations at Covent Garden theatre, and in his long retirement from the ring he appeared at Astley's equestrian theatre as an entertainer. And yet, in his autobiography, Mendoza elides almost all mention of the many other people involved in producing these spectacles, exemplifying celebrity culture's tendency to conceal its own means of production, and to attribute the fame of its stars to personal talent and

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determination, along with an X-factor that makes celebrities at once unique and yet just like the rest of us.

Rossini and Mendoza have one thing in common: they outlived their most spectacular moment of achievement. Rossini became a virtual recluse, eschewing all society apart from a weekly salon at which his wife played hostess while he appeared as a kind of living relic. Mendoza – more at home in the saloon than the salon – turned his hand to tavern-keeping and showmanship, and wrote his autobiography. Sarah Siddons also faced the problem of a long retirement after a successful celebrity career. She distressed her admirers by returning to the stage after her voice and her looks had begun to deteriorate; by the time John and Phineas see her on a provincial tour in *John Halifax, Gentleman*, she is well past her prime. When one of the bearers of Siddons's sedan chair is knocked down in Mulock Craik's novel, John Halifax seizes the opportunity and takes the place of the injured man. Siddons makes it into the theatre safely, and as a gesture of gratitude John and Phineas are shown to the best seats in the house. Phineas gives no account of the performance, because 'all the world has heard of the *Lady Macbeth* of Mrs Siddons', but he comments: 'Well, she is gone, like the three brief hours when we hung on her every breath, as if it could stay even the wheels of time. But they have whirled on – whirled her away with them into the infinite, and into earthly oblivion!'²⁶ Siddons's triumph is only temporary. An integral part of the definition of celebrity was the isolation of a kind of public recognition whose inferiority was guaranteed by its ephemerality. This kind of public profile, which came to be called celebrity, was distinguished from the durable greatness that was reserved for individuals of real merit. When Hazlitt wrote that 'Fame is the recompense not of the living, but of the dead', and when Shelley wrote that 'Even in modern times, no living poet ever arrived at the fulness of his fame', they endorsed a logic that separated fleeting celebrity from lasting fame.²⁷ Actors inevitably found themselves on the wrong side of this distinction, because the temporal nature of their art seemed to disqualify them from timeless fame. Siddons's celebrity, in Phineas's view, is distinct from the posthumous fame of poets or conquerors. It burns intensely precisely because it burns itself out so soon.

And yet, as Heather McPherson shows, the memory of her finest performances lived on. Drawing on the concept of theatrical 'ghosting' developed by Marvin Carlson and Joseph Roach, McPherson complicates the binary opposition between transient celebrity and lasting fame. She shows how Siddons's legacy was shaped by her attempt to position Fanny Kemble as a dynastic successor and by a series of evocations by later actresses from

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Lillah McCarthy to Bette Davis. The composer, the boxer and the actress are fascinating individuals, but finally it is the structure of fascination, and not the individuals, that is the subject of this collection. When placed in apposition, Rossini, Mendoza and Siddons function as case studies in the history of celebrity, demonstrating how the identities of individuals in different areas of cultural production could be branded by a celebrity industry based in print media, and circulated among a massive, anonymous, socially diverse and geographically distributed audience.

Mendoza's musculature, Siddons's embonpoint and even Rossini's falsetto suggest the importance of the gendered body to the culture of celebrity, as well as the anxieties that arose when gender norms became blurred. At times, celebrity itself was represented as feminine, or effeminate. Hester Thrale, writing to Samuel Johnson in 1784, used the word to indicate the modesty of her ambitions and her gendered sense of propriety. 'Perhaps by my fame (and I hope it is so)', she wrote, 'you mean only that celebrity which is a consideration of a much lower kind. I care for that only as it may give pleasure to my husband and his friends.'²⁸ At other times, celebrity was represented as primarily masculine, off limits to women: many women in the period might have joined in the complaint of Letitia Landon's heroine Eulalia – 'I am a woman: – tell me not of fame'.²⁹ Nonetheless, women from Mary Robinson to Sarah Siddons and from Ann Yearsley to Landon herself grappled with celebrity status. More generally, Mary Robinson represented the pursuit of celebrity creating gender trouble all round: 'men effeminized like women; and women assuming the masculine deportment of the other sex; all eagerly pursuing the popular phantom NOTORIETY!'.³⁰ The vocabulary used by these writers – 'celebrity', 'fame' and 'notoriety' – has yet to settle into the opposition of sturdy fame and flimsy celebrity, but they make clear that concerns about fame are rarely far removed from concerns about gender.

These concerns are explored by three essays in the third section, beginning with Clara Tuite's essay on George 'Beau' Brummell. From a modest background, Brummell rose to a kind of distinction that was not available in previous cultures of recognition. Without holding any significant public office, or producing anything except his own impeccable appearance, he became the unchallenged arbiter of sartorial standards for England's fashionable men. But, as Tuite shows in sometimes gruesome detail, Brummell's stylish apotheosis was the prelude to a protracted drama of abjection. Having fled to Calais to escape his gambling debts, Brummell found himself unable to maintain his scrupulous sartorial standards, even as the memory of his heyday made him a tourist attraction for travellers