

Death, Nineteenth-Century Celebrity, and Material Culture

Introduction

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In August 1858, *The Art-Journal* reported on a ‘striking’ legal case that had recently been heard at the Tribunal de la Seine in Paris: the sister of the internationally celebrated actress Mademoiselle Rachel (born Elisabeth Félix) had sued the artist Madame O’Connell following the latter’s attempt to sell prints depicting Rachel on her deathbed, reproduced from a photograph of the dying superstar that had been privately commissioned by the Félix family. In court, Sarah Félix ‘plead[ed] affectingly that, though her sister had been a public performer, and as such public property, she was not acting here, - and her death-bed, like her private life, was the property of her family alone’ (‘Mademoiselle Rachel’, 253). The author of *The Art-Journal*’s column appears to have agreed, condemning Madame O’Connell’s exploitative act as one of ‘gross impudence’ from which the ‘mind turns with a sort of horror’ (253). And yet the magazine’s own representation of Rachel’s death as ‘the last scene in the last performance of the great actress’ implicitly frames her demise as a public entertainment, staged for communal consumption (253).

The reporting of the ‘Rachel affair’ thus reveals the fraught status of the nineteenth-century dead celebrity, a figure whose posthumous existence was typically caught between private interests and the popular desire for revelation, exposure or parasocial connection. Following a celebrity’s death, a variety of agents – friends, family, professional associates, journalists, biographers, and fans – invariably interacted to fashion (and re-fashion) the celebrity’s legacy for posterity. Rachel herself seems to have been only too aware of the flurry of competing narratives that would quickly follow on from her passing: when a visitor ‘of distinction’ requested an autograph from the actress as she lay dying of tuberculosis, she

wrote in response, ‘In a week from now I shall begin to be food for worms, and for writers of biographies. RACHEL’ (Madame de B., 316). Anticipating her future cannibalisation by gossip-hungry chroniclers, Rachel’s self-construction here coincides with Margaret Schwartz’s concept of the ‘tabloid body’: an iconic figure whose life is the ‘focus of scrutiny, scandal, and adoration’, and whose untimely death becomes a media event (6).

Following Schwartz, this special issue takes a particular interest in the material *corpus* left behind by such dead celebrities. Defined as an ‘assemblage of biological, physical, cultural, and discursive objects’, the posthumous corpus includes not only ‘the physical body of the deceased’, but also ‘images of that body in life and sometimes in death’; texts that reify and ‘construct the legacy’ of the dead; and ‘technologies’ of preservation, such as photographs and death masks, that ‘allow the corpse to circulate as a communicative object’ (Schwartz 16). As Schwartz argues - and as the ‘Rachel affair’ only too neatly demonstrates - such objects are often implicated in capitalistic systems of exchange and may thus continue to produce economic value long after the celebrity body has ceased to exist (13). Indeed, death may actively enhance monetary worth: ‘nothing sells an author’s books so well as his death’, the *Pall Mall Gazette* wryly noted following the death of the renowned poet Robert Browning in 1889 (‘Literary Notes’ 1).

A series of articles from the late Victorian press further illustrate the ways in which the celebrity corpus was routinely commodified and monetised post mortem. A 1900 essay on ‘The Value of a Dead Celebrity’ in the *Cornhill Magazine* itemises the amounts realised by recent sales of (among other things) locks of celebrity hair, including those of Marie Antoinette (36*l.*), Napoleon (30*l.*), and Walter Scott (26*l.* 5*s.*) (MacFarlane 367). A later article in the *Windsor Magazine* highlights the popularity of ‘Nelson Relics’ with ‘Relic Hunters’, and reports that a letter from the illustrious naval hero to his lover, Emma Hamilton, recently achieved an astonishing £1,050 at auction (Nelson 517). Meanwhile, in a

rather more salacious piece, *The Ludgate* magazine set out the ‘cash value’ of various celebrity ‘criminal relics’, including the pistols and crowbar used by Maria and Frederick Manning in the notorious ‘Bermondsey Horror’ murder case (Banfield 407). (The article reveals that these items were purchased following the Mannings’ execution for fifty pounds by Madame Tussaud’s, for display in their ‘Chamber of Horrors’ exhibition).

It would be a mistake to assume from all this that the Victorian public made only *economic* investments in dead celebrities, however. As a number of the essays in this special issue demonstrate, the illustrious dead were also imbricated in potent systems of symbolic meaning and affective significance. Desiring, owning, touching or otherwise engaging with objects connected to venerated figures could bring deeply personal, idiosyncratic forms of pleasure to collectors, readers and fans, and these libidinal attachments were by no means diminished by the celebrity’s death. As Sharon Marcus explains ‘the majority of fans pursue intimacy, connection, and proximity, not with real people, but with the heaps of stuff generated by celebrity culture’ (96). The celebrity’s demise often brought about a multiplication of this ‘stuff’, as commemorative newspapers, prints and editions were issued, and memorabilia, keepsakes and souvenirs produced to satisfy a transitory spike in public demand. Death could thus, ironically, bring the consumers of celebrity culture closer to the stars that they idolised by increasing opportunities to interact with the celebrity corpus. Looking at a portrait or photograph of an absent celebrity, reading a text in which they were immortalised, or wearing an item of clothing with which they were synonymous could all inspire powerful feelings of intimacy, which were none the less emotionally charged for their illusory status.

At a collective level, too, the death of a celebrated figure could generate strong affective responses, serving as a focal point for social cathexis. The body of the celebrity was frequently constructed in a metonymic relationship to the body of the nation, and thus

functioned as a nidus of shared myths, values and ideals. Critical readings of the mourning rites and spectacular funerals which followed the deaths of the military hero, the Duke of Wellington (Sinemma 1998, Pearsall 1999); the Poet Laureate, Alfred Lord Tennyson (Matthews 2002); and the boxing legend Tom Sayers (Huggins 2011) demonstrate the ways in which diverse public figures were co-opted as exemplary symbols of British nationhood and Victorian masculinity by a variety of media and political interests. Yet, despite this susceptibility to being pressed into the service of dominant cultural narratives, the celebrity corpus rarely signified in a singular or unified way. Timothy Jenks, for instance, has highlighted the competing narratives and hermeneutic tensions that surrounded the obsequies to mark Nelson's death at the Battle of Trafalgar, arguing that 'Nelson's funeral emerges as the site of a vigorous contest' between different class-based and political constituencies in early nineteenth-century society (424).

The celebrity's identity, then, was by no means stable or fixed in death. Although the famous may have made concerted efforts to engineer their posthumous standing while still alive, their cultural legacies and celebrity afterlives were nonetheless fluid and fractured: open to appropriation, recalibration and refashioning. Anne-Marie Millim has highlighted how Victorian biographies and posthumous reminiscences not only instituted a particular and partial image of the celebrity, but also served as opportunities for their authors to 'establish *themselves* as vicarious celebrities' (165; our emphasis) by curating the original star's life story – and accentuating their role within it – for their own ends. As well as being at the mercy of memoirists and obituarists, dead celebrities were also subject to the vagaries of popular taste and opinion. Public investment in what Ruth Penfold-Mounce refers to as the dead celebrity's 'bodily capital' (491) had the potential to fall as well as rise; changing social, historical and cultural contexts could work to transform or intensify the public's interest in

particular posthumous reputations or (as John Morton's contribution to this collection suggests) cause it to slip away into indifference.

The Victorian practice of commemorating deceased luminaries has generally been read as part of that period's wider impulse to memorialise the dead. Studies by Pat Jalland (1996), Jolene Zigarovich (2012) and Deborah Lutz (2015) have illustrated the Victorians' fascination with death and its accoutrements, and fervent participation in rituals of mourning and remembrance. The specific, intersecting relationship between death and celebrity has a much longer history, however. In his landmark study *The Frenzy of Renown* (1986), Leo Braudy traces the relationship back to the ancient civilisations of Egypt, Greece, and Rome, which placed particular 'emphasis on fame at the point of death' (60). Even before the 'advent of Christianity', Braudy argues, 'fame, however it was defined, promised a way to evade death and deny its ultimate power' (553). The 'urge to surmount death' via posthumous renown continued into the early modern and modern eras, when technological developments made it easier for the famous to leave behind 'a deathless image' (Braudy 553). During the eighteenth century, in particular, 'the huge expansion of popular print journalism' made it possible for 'almost anyone' to 'find a form of secular immortality in print and image' (Barry 260). As Elizabeth Barry points out, newspaper and magazine obituaries from the period popularised 'many of the features of the discourse of celebrity' found in 'today's news media', and transformed 'the audience for the written commemoration of death' from 'faceless posterity' to a 'media-literate public' (261).

As well as suffusing popular forms of print culture, a preoccupation with posthumous acclaim also informed the aesthetic philosophy of the Romantic movement in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. While eschewing the term 'celebrity', Andrew Bennett acknowledges the synergistic relationship between death and fame in *Romantic Poets and the Culture of Posterity* (1999), arguing that 'writers, artists and other manufacturers of

cultural artefacts' in this period enjoyed 'a perennial fascination with the immortality effect, the ability of a poem, novel, statue, painting, photograph, symphony to survive beyond the death of the artist' (1). So powerful was this lustre of enduring fame, it could 'cast a backward shadow', rendering the Romantic celebrity "'immortal" before their time', as Paul Westover points out: 'A visit to a great living writer, like a visit to a writer's grave, could be imagined as a quest for an audience with someone ghostly. Indeed, literary tourists often talked about the living authors they met as if they already *were* dead' (13; original emphasis).

The thanatocentric logic underpinning literary celebrity represents an important point of continuity between the Romantic and Victorian eras. Critics including Samantha Matthews (2004), Nicola J. Watson (2006), and Deborah Lutz (2015) have extensively explored the imaginative and actual engagements with dead writers' physical and textual corp(u)ses that took place across these periods. Their scholarship problematises the simplistic association of Victorian culture with a tacitly debased, ephemeral 'celebrity' and Romantic culture with the lofty sublimity of posthumous 'fame'. As Lutz suggests, the 'Romantic attraction to remnants and wreckage, brought into conjunction with the belief that the self can be contained in the material [...] provided a basic foundation from the love of relics that would grow stronger as the Victorian era began' (51). The gendered dimension to this cultural interest in the relics of celebrity has been usefully explored by contributors to Maura Ives and Ann R. Hawkins's edited collection *Women Writers and the Artifacts of Celebrity in the Long Nineteenth Century* (2012). Here, essays on the posthumous reputations of Jane Austen, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, and Elizabeth Whitman highlight the specific roles that material objects, early biographies, family memoirs, and romanticised novels played in reassessing and reasserting female reputational legacies.

Evincing a similar interest in the 'artefacts of celebrity', this special issue likewise draws upon and interrogates the relationship between fame and material culture in the

nineteenth century. Beyond printed and visual forms, our contributors also examine celebrity objects such as death masks and fashionable gowns, sacralised spaces in fiction, and the function of the periodical press (itself a material commodity) in constructing the death of a celebrity. In examining the complex intersections between death and fame, the essays collected here all call upon the material culture of death as a critical-conceptual framework, while also drawing, in specific instances, on theories of gender, ethnicity, visibility, queerness and fandom.

Our first article, Anna Barry and Verity Burke's 'Behind the Mask: Death Masks, Celebrity and the Laurence Hutton Collection', analyses celebrity death masks as secular relics. Investigating the collecting and curatorial practices of the American writer and critic Laurence Hutton (b.1834- d.1904), Barry and Burke draw on Lutz's study of Victorian relic culture to underpin their analyses of the death masks' perceived indexicality and authenticity; they suggest that, relic-like, Hutton's collection of death masks proffered a sense of proximal intimacy with the dead celebrity, materialising intimate encounters with prominent deceased figures. The essay also reads the death masks in dialogue with Hutton's wider catalogue of celebrity memorabilia, including his collection of *cartes de visite*, letters, and autographs. Examining this hitherto understudied assemblage of material items proves fruitful, the authors argue, because it provides 'a unique opportunity to interrogate the motivations and collections praxis of an individual who was not only deeply engaged with celebrity culture and the material culture of death, but specifically invested in their intersections' (000). They conclude by eloquently arguing that Hutton's collection of death memorabilia and his publications on the topic enabled him to "situate himself within the pantheon of celebrity: firstly by evidencing his intimacy with many famous individuals, and secondly by underscoring his role as curator of their material remains" (000).

In 'Dickens, Death, and the Dolly Varden Dress', Danielle Dove similarly suggests that nineteenth-century celebrity objects were the material mechanisms by which fans, cultural commentators, and other agents might achieve a sense of immediacy with the dead celebrity figure. She attends to the 'Dolly Varden' gown, a specific type of polonaise that became fashionable soon after Charles Dickens's death in 1870. Dove argues that the gown, which has previously been read in light of consumer culture and fashionable fads, might also be usefully examined as a 'celebrity artefact and site of posthumous commemoration' (000). Drawing on nineteenth-century print culture, this essay shows how the appeal of the Dolly Varden gown was frequently located in its intimate associations with the dead-celebrity author and his lively, fictional character. These textual offerings, Dove contends, constituted an intervention into celebrity-fan culture, repositioning the women that adopted the fashion trend as active and autonomous fans. She concludes by arguing that the wearing of 'the Dolly Varden dress might be positioned as a practice of mimetic fandom, facilitating a particularly female form of imagined intimate contact with both the author and his fictional creation' (000).

A corresponding focus on material culture is evident in Sarah Parker's article, 'Reframing Amy Levy: Photography, Celebrity and Posthumous Representation'. Here, Parker interrogates the role of the photograph in the formation, manipulation, and desecration of Amy Levy's (b.1861- d.1889) posthumous legacy and reputation. It is through one image in particular, the Montabone portrait, that Parker argues the author is mediated after death, becoming a 'conveniently voiceless image onto which various interpretations can be projected' (000). Examining several of these often troubling interpretations by writers such as Harry Quilter, Katharine Tynan, and Grant Allen, Parker demonstrates the manifold ways and the ends to which Levy's photograph was invoked in reviews, elegies, and fictionalised accounts of her life. She argues that such writers' 're-animation' of the tragic poetic figure

served to imbue her image with their own, occasionally pejorative, views about female education, genius, ‘madness’, and Jewish identity. Levy’s image, she contends, is therefore appropriated ‘in order to sell copies of her books and to promote the parasitic literary productions of others that feed on the tragic mythos surrounding her death’ (000). The article thus raises important questions about the ethical responsibilities of those involved in reframing deceased celebrities’ posthumous legacies for consumption.

Henry James, it transpires in the next essay by Charlotte Boyce, was only too aware of such invasive forays into the lives of dead celebrity figures. In ‘Auratic Encounters with Posthumous Literary Celebrity in Henry James’s Late Victorian Tales: Desiring the Dead’, Boyce documents James’s anxieties around the treatment of deceased celebrities, but argues that his personal writings and three of his late Victorian tales – ‘The Aspern Papers’ (1888), ‘John Delavoy’ (1898), and ‘The Real Right Thing’ (1899) – expose an intense ‘necromantic’ fascination with the eminent dead. Focusing on these texts’ depictions of sacralised spaces, affective objects, and haptic fandom as the channels through which the ‘secret, inner-lives of dead literary celebrities’ (000) might be accessed, the essay posits that a complex preoccupation with posthumous literary celebrity is central to each of the tales’ respective narratives. Oscillating between exhilaration at the prospect of imaginative communion with dead luminaries and an aversion to the undignified inquisitiveness of certain fan-behaviours, the texts at play within Boyce’s article thus demonstrate a ‘desire for intimate contact with departed genius’ in which ‘the physical and intellectual pleasures that stem from auratic encounters with dead literary celebrities’ are at once legitimate and welcome, and a source of ambivalent concern (000).

The final essay in the special issue is John Morton’s article ‘Wordsworth’s Death and the Figure of the Poet in 1850’, which examines the important role of the periodical press in mediating the death of William Wordsworth in April 1850. Positioning the periodical as a

key textual and material space within which the parameters of the poet's talent and literary reputation might be navigated, contested, and reevaluated after death, Morton maps Wordsworth's declining celebrity status through the decidedly muted print reaction to both his passing and his posthumously published *The Prelude*. It is in the apathetic press coverage of Wordsworth's death that Morton identifies an apparent dislocation between the figure of the poet and that of the celebrity. In spite of the obvious lack of appreciation for the man himself, Morton argues that, nevertheless, Wordsworth's 'name endured as a byword for "poet" in periodicals of the time, and the Wordsworthian pastoral lyric remained an enduring form in periodicals of the year of his death' (000). Consequently, this article reveals the power of the nineteenth-century periodical press in prompting reputational reappraisals, and in shaping, altering, and intervening in the legacy of dead celebrities.

Collectively, the essays gathered here examine the complex ways in which dead celebrities were memorialised or forgotten, appropriated, or overlooked in the interests of specific nineteenth-century cultural values. They pay particular attention to the impact of a celebrity's death on the material objects, spaces, and places with which they were associated and ask what the print reaction to the deaths of prominent nineteenth-century figures can tell us about the changing status and reception of certain celebrities. In doing so, the articles in this special issue illuminate the historical resonances and continuities between the Victorians' intense preoccupation with eminent figures and our own contemporary fascination with celebrity culture. As several of the essays attest, the material objects, spaces, and cultural apparatuses with which nineteenth-century celebrity figures were commemorated and memorialised speak to a continued desire to commune or connect with the famous dead – to forge tangible, if imagined, points of intersection between their lives and ours through material culture.

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