Transatlantic Celebrity: European Fame in Nineteenth-Century America

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Recent work on celebrity has shifted the focus away from an exclusive preoccupation with twentieth-century and contemporary culture to chart the beginnings of modern celebrity in the eighteenth century, when, in Joe Moran’s words, ‘the development of a market culture allowed ambitious individuals to press themselves into the cultural void created by the decline of the traditional sources of power and influence - the church, the monarchy and the aristocracy’ (2000: 7). Scholars have demonstrated that by the early nineteenth century a recognisable celebrity culture existed in Europe (Brock 2006; Mole 2007; Mole 2009; Eisner 2009; McDayter 2010; Berenson & Giloi 2010; Hawkins & Ives 2012; Boyce, Finnerty & Millim, 2013) and in America (Baker 2001; Sentilles 2003; Richards 2004; Blake 2006). Involving ‘a cultural apparatus, consisting of the relations between an individual, an industry and an audience, that took shape in response to the industrialised print culture of the late eighteenth century’ (Mole 2007: xi), celebrity culture encouraged and facilitated an obsessive fascination with a public figure’s personality and biography by mass producing and disseminating visual, verbal and material representations of such individuals designed to foster ever-closer forms of communication between the famous and the non-famous. This rhetoric of and market for intimacy and their increasing connections with publicity ‘changed the ways in which celebrities were presented before the public [and] altered the experience of public life—both for those whose lives were now open to popular scrutiny and for those who enjoyed their seemingly privileged glimpses into the private world of the renowned’ (Blake 2006: 142).

While scholars such as Alexis Easley have demonstrated the connections between the creation of a ‘coherent national history’ and celebrity in nineteenth-century British culture, in which celebrities ‘came to be viewed as exemplary men and women who embodied the anxieties and ideals of modern life’ (2011: 11), the transnational dimensions of celebrity in this period have not been fully discussed. What are the implications for nineteenth-century European culture of honouring, celebrating or memorialising American writers, performers or artists? And what does it mean for Americans to pay tribute to European celebrities and personalities at a time when their country is attempting to establish its cultural independence from Europe? If celebrity is about creating and using public paragons to symbolise social and cultural ideals, or to embody prescient anxieties and debates, and, in particular, in relation to a nation’s identity, progress or sense of its own importance and national superiority, then what happens if the idolised figure is from another country? Building on the work that has been done on nineteenth-century celebrity in Britain and America as well as specific research on transatlantic celebrity culture (Weber 2012; Adams 2014), the papers at the Celebrity Encounters: Transatlantic Fame in Nineteenth-Century Britain and America conference (2014), held at the University of Portsmouth, considered the realities of being a famous American in Europe or a celebrated European in America. The first journal special issue stemming from this research event was entitled ‘Celebrity Encounters: Famous Americans in Nineteenth-Century Europe’ and published in *Critical Survey* (2015). The essayists in this volume countered the stereotype of Americans as predominantly tourists in nineteenth-century Europe with examples of Americans who were or became public figures, notables, lions and celebrities. The volume examines the European reception and fame of writers such as Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Walt Whitman, Henry James, Stephen Crane and W. H. Hudson, as well as James’s fascination with celebrity figures, both European and American, real and fictional, in his writings. The special issue points to interconnections, interrelationships, rivalries, and real or imagined encounters between these Americans and European icons such as Alfred Tennyson, John Ruskin, Robert Browning, Joseph Conrad and Ford Madox Ford. It signals not only the transatlantic nature of European and American culture but also foreshadows a modernist reconstruction of this terrain that will destabilise the cultural centres and the boundaries of English literature in favour of a transnational literary culture over a nation-based one.

This second collection of essays, stemming from the same conference, is different from the *Critical Survey* collection in two fundamental ways. Firstly, it focuses on the specifics of European celebrity in nineteenth-century America and, secondly, it takes a more interdisciplinary perspective by considering the fame of orators, performers, artists, lecturers and aristocrats as well as of writers. Adding important nuances to recent studies of nineteenth-century Anglophilia (Tennenhouse 2007; Tamarkin 2008) and transatlantic literary relations (McFadden 1999; Flint 2009; Hutchings & Wright 2011; Lueck, Bailey & Damon-Bach 2012; Eckel 2013; Manning 2013; Clark 2013; Maudlin & Peel 2013; Peel & Maudlin 2013), this volume examines the literary, artistic and theatrical careers, cultural productions and artistic reception of Europeans in America in relation to the workings of celebrity, fandom and publicity in US culture. According to Leo Braudy, ‘America pioneered in the implicit democratic and modern assumption that *everyone* could and should be looked at. This it seemed was one of the privileges for which the American Revolution was fought’ (1997: 506). The fame of Europeans in America in this era need not simply reflect Europhilia or exemplify the need of Americans to maintain or claim connections with their cultural heritage, but also signify America’s assertion of its individual distinctiveness in its ability to honour figures of national otherness and embrace representatives of another nation. The discourses, practices and media through which Europeans became famous in America foreground the new possibilities this country offered to European men and women who achieved and maintained public acclaim and professionalism through offering something unique, novel and different within an American marketplace. Establishing, facilitating and mediating relations and connections between Europe and America, celebrity culture shaped not merely careers and public images but also the identities of fans, and complicated contentious boundaries between the domestic, local, and national, as well as between masculine and feminine, highlighting these and other contested ideas on a mass-mediated and increasingly international stage.

In order to trace the emergence of a transnational celebrity culture evident in the nineteenth-century United States, this special issue is organised along a chronological progression, starting in the first decade of the century with one of the earliest performance-based celebrities in the nation and examining the development of a maturing celebrity culture across each decade right up to the mass-circulation journalistic tactics of the 1890s. In each of these contributions to this journal issue, European fame is realised across specific American audiences, mediated through American publications or social intermediaries and drawn into historical reconsiderations of nineteenth-century American identity, revisiting fluid boundaries of gender, nationality and the limits of public or private personalities.

The first two papers in the collection take two early examples of American reception and mediation of transnational fame and celebrity, one through the personal audiences and word-of-mouth fame of a touring celebrity and the other through public presentation of the private lives of often-distant female poets. Carolyn Eastman’s ‘The Transatlantic Celebrity of Mr. O: Oratory and the Networks of Reputation in Early Nineteenth-Century Britain and America’ surveys the astonishing career of James Ogilvie, a pioneering orator of Scottish descent whose performances were promoted by American luminaries such as Thomas Jefferson, John Quincy Adams and Washington Irving. Ogilvie proved himself adept at making excellent use of social networks, hand-written endorsements and word-of-mouth, traveling from place to place with highly advanced groundwork to ensure an audience would await him. Despite the nascent state of American mass-media outlets during the period of his tours from 1808 to 1820, Ogilvie proved himself an early American celebrity by trading not only on his talent and his personality, but, as Eastman reveals, on the emerging social networks of early-nineteenth-century American culture seeking to establish their own credentials by promoting his performances on his behalf.

After Eastman’s examination of the spread of celebrity reputation through personal communication and social networks, Páraic Finnerty in ‘The Poetics of Sisterly Celebrity: Sarah Hale, British Women Poets and the Gift of Transatlantic Fame’ reveals the American mediation of celebrity poetics through newspapers, popular periodicals and printed gift books between 1820 and 1860, particularly Sarah Hale’s *The Ladies' Wreath* (1837, 1839) and its revelation of the British poetess as transnational celebrity. Finnerty’s recognition of the preconceived ideas of women’s poetry and ‘the commodification of sentiment’ sets the stage for Hale’s efforts to repackage women’s poetry as representative of a more diverse, more transnational and more open cultural community of transatlantic women, drawing portraits of celebrity poetesses, including intimate details of their physical or spiritual state, so they might appear incarnate through the commercially-available gift book for even remote American audiences. In revealing the literary lives as well as packaging the literary texts of both British and American female poets, Hale offers the gift to American readers of transcending traditional boundaries and revising the very conception of the textually embodied Poetess figure.

The next two essays in this special issue explore the tours of the United States of two notable British figures between 1868 and 1882 and their reception in the developing American celebrity culture of the time. HollyGale Millette’s essay ‘Mad About the Blonde’: Lydia Thompson’s Transatlantic Celebrity and Fandom’ traces the celebrity dancer and comedienne along with her troupe of ‘British Blondes’ on three tours, particularly her first from 1868 to 1874. Millette reveals how Thompson’s ‘foreignness’ both counted against her with certain audiences, but also allowed her a transgressive approach not condoned for local performers. In fact, Thompson’s audiences were divided on her role as a celebrity, and Millette reveals Thompson profiting from both positive and negative publicity – taking, in Millette’s words, ‘action in an aggressively public way, to physically fight for space in her own narrative’. But Millette, like other contributors to this special issue, does not only review the celebrity’s own tactics for promotion, but also the construction of Thompson the celebrity from the fan’s perspective through parasocial interaction, examining the obsessive nature of one fan in particular in idealising Thompson. The celebrity becomes, in this nineteenth-century context, an aspirational figure for the marginalised, just as she had been despised by guardians of conservative tastes and values.

Eleanor Fitzsimons’s essay, ‘“The Paradise for Women”: How Oscar Wilde was embraced by the women of America’ similarly takes up a notable European celebrity’s tour of the United States and examines, not solely Wilde’s role in promoting Aestheticism, but the social structures and interactions that sustained his success in 1882. Fitzsimons explores in detail the women who supported and promoted Wilde’s brand of devotion to art, arguing that an emerging American aesthetic found a ready spokesman in Wilde through raising what had often been seen as the ‘secondary arts’, including fashion and home décor, to the status of fine art. In recognising how these society women lionised Wilde, Fitzsimons reveals that the polarising figure he represented had much to do with the emergence of new postbellum conceptions of gender and public or private spaces for art and beauty in the latter decades of the nineteenth century.

While Chloe Ward similarly takes up the arrival in America of a celebrated British artist in ‘England’s Michelangelo in the Metropolitan Museum of Art: The G. F. Watts Exhibition, 1884-5’, Watts himself never set foot in the United States, and Ward follows the transatlantic tour of his paintings – particularly tracing the movements of one painting, *Love and Life*, across the sea to New York, to Chicago and Washington DC, and back again. The very idea of the transatlantic celebrity is troubled by Watts’s consciousness of the ocean as impediment, more easily traversed by fame and reputation in an era of mass media, but proving a treacherous obstacle to be crossed by paintings of unique monetary and cultural value. Ward outlines a compelling narrative of Watts’s engagement with the pursuit of fame, his intimate involvement in the display and reception of his paintings and his enlisting of Americans to elaborate on the moral themes of his work for a new audience. Despite Watts’s status as ‘England’s Michelangelo’, Ward makes a compelling case for reading Watt’s desire to leave an ‘international legacy’ – donating *Love and Life* to the American people as a ‘token of the great interest I feel in the [American] National progress’ – as representative of Watts’s transnational celebrity.

Richard Salmon, in ‘What the World Says’: Henry James’s *The Reverberator*, Celebrity Journalism, and Global Space’, explores celebrity culture at perhaps its most mature and most invasive within the nineteenth century. Outlining the blurring of lines between the celebrity as simultaneously a private and public figure, Salmon traces the role of mass-media journalism, particularly through two periodicals – each named *The World* but published on opposite sides of the Atlantic Ocean – in widely disseminating intimate details about national and cultural celebrity. The rise of new journalistic practices, according to Salmon, is an important context for reading Henry James’s novel *The Reverberator*, tracing James’s intimate understanding and close study of the mechanisms – including the celebrity interview and the gossip column – by which new journalism quickly disseminated information, but often at the expense of true cultural understanding, especially across national boundaries. In revealing what is lost through the transmission of private and intimate details of public figures, Salmon reveals that James’s novel is an important engagement with the cultural development of new modes of communication, particularly the *New York World* and its transatlantic namesake, in their attempts and their failures to ‘mediate the process of transatlantic cultural exchange on which James built his reputation as a novelist’.

In ranging broadly across the cultural genres of painting, poetry, prose fiction, journalism and various arts of performance (including oratory, burlesque and the aesthetic lecture), the essays in this special issue demonstrate the ways in which questions of gender, of sexuality, of public/private identities, of nationality and transnationality were mediated in and through the discourse of fame. They reveal the relationship between the emerging mechanisms of American celebrity culture and an evolving discourse of American cultural nationalism, showing the ways issues of nation both dissipate and come to the fore as notable Europeans are transformed into public personalities. What emerges through this exploration of a variety of media, of audiences, of types of celebrity – whether through the touring and publicity of the celebrity, the lionising and publicising of the previously unknown, to the presentation of physical artefact or the publication of those physically distant – is not merely an insight into nineteenth-century American culture, but a more complete picture of the evolution of a modern celebrity culture that dissolves nation-based borders, boundaries and identities.

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