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## INTRODUCTION

On January 28, 1966, *Life* magazine put a French-born actress named Catherine on its cover. Her long, straight hair cascaded down the page, framing the charming face selected to represent a group of ten “lovely young film stars of Europe.” Calling the young women “stars” was something of a misnomer, since all were relative newcomers. But given that *Life* was then enjoying a peak circulation of 8.5 million copies, chances were good that at least some of the featured starlets would soon develop into true celebrities.<sup>1</sup> Each had been handed an express ticket to fame, none more so than the woman showcased on the cover.

What would it take for Catherine’s big break to result in true celebrity? If stars achieve their status primarily because they are uniquely gifted, attractive, and interesting people, then the answer would depend on the aspiring performer herself. If the public plays the chief role in determining who becomes a celebrity, then Catherine’s success would depend on how well she realized its collective ideals and desires. And if the power to confer stardom resides first and foremost with the media, then publicity alone would do the trick.

Each of these three explanations of how celebrity works has received considerable support among both scholars and the general public. The notion that the media determines celebrity has been especially popular since 1961, when cultural historian Daniel Boorstin declared, “The hero created himself; the celebrity is created by the media.” For Boorstin, the celebrity was merely a chimera, “a person who is known for his well-knownness.”<sup>2</sup> The idea of being famous only for being famous caught on, as did Boorstin’s dire view of celebrity as at best an empty tautology, at worst a mirage imposed on hapless citizens unable to distinguish illusions from reality.<sup>3</sup>

Although the occasional economist has since argued that celebrity culture efficiently sorts for quality, many people still cast stars as deceptive effects of a sinister, monolithic, and all-powerful cause: the media.<sup>4</sup> This account presents celebrities as victims who, despite their prestige, wealth,

and apparent success, are nothing but commodities used to sell other commodities: movie tickets, clothes, cars. At the same time, this critique also charges celebrities with victimizing the public by putting a glamorous face on the status quo and propping up the myth that anyone who works hard and has talent can succeed.<sup>5</sup> As inauthentic beings themselves, celebrities allegedly excel at peddling the false dreams manufactured by what Frankfurt School critic Theodor Adorno termed “the culture industry,” which he accused of promoting “mass deception” and of impeding “the development of autonomous, independent individuals who judge and decide consciously for themselves.”<sup>6</sup> By these lights, fans are passive fools, celebrities are deceptively alluring pawns, media companies are evil puppeteers, and celebrity culture is a hoax that critical thinkers must expose.

The notion that celebrities are famous merely for being famous persists to this day, appealing to laudable desires to resist authority and unmask falsehood. Some dissenters have countered this pessimistic view. Film scholars writing case studies of individual stars have pointed out that many celebrities actively mold their own personae and should be given credit for their spectacular successes. Researchers studying fans who create their own materials and organize their own communities have argued that publics play the key role in sustaining celebrity culture.<sup>7</sup> These three approaches disagree over who wields power. But each concludes that celebrity results when one and only one entity exercises overwhelming force over the others. For some, it is celebrities themselves who charm the media and wow the public. Others believe that the public decides who will be a star. And many still contend that producers, publicists, and journalists determine who will be a celebrity.

There is only one problem with these accounts: this is not how celebrity works. No one entity has the power to determine who becomes a celebrity, not even the media. Consider the woman who landed the prime spot on the cover of *Life* magazine, Catherine Spaak (figure I.1). Catherine who? Exactly. Talented and hardworking, Spaak enjoyed a credible career as a minor singer and actor, but she never became a star. By contrast, another Catherine, accorded a mere third of a page toward the article’s end, soon became an international sensation and an icon for the ages: Catherine Deneuve (figure I.2). Known both for her starring roles in critically and commercially successful films and for the famous men with whom she had children, Deneuve became the face of Chanel No. 5 perfume in the



FIGURE I.1. Catherine Spaak, cover of *Life* magazine, January 28, 1966.



FIGURE I.2. "The New Beauties," *Life* magazine, January 28, 1966, pages 46–47.

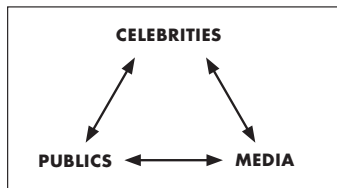
1970s, starred opposite rock star David Bowie in a 1983 vampire movie, and launched her own perfume and fashion lines. In 1971, she was one of 343 famous French women who publicly acknowledged having had illegal abortions. In 2018, she lumbered into #MeToo territory when she signed an open letter that denounced women protesting harassment as waging war on sexual freedom, then quickly apologized to the many whom her stance offended.

Being showcased on the cover of *Life* in 1966 did not confer stardom on the one Catherine any more than being buried in the story's back pages prevented the other from becoming world famous. No one can become a celebrity without media attention, but media coverage alone does not a celebrity make. Publicists, marketers, and entertainment industries are not omnipotent kingmakers. Stalled campaigns abound.<sup>8</sup> If relentless publicity alone created celebrity, then every one of the many songs that ever benefited from payola would have become a major hit, and every heavily promoted actor would be a star.

## A NEW THEORY OF CELEBRITY CULTURE

Celebrity culture is a drama involving three equally powerful groups: media producers, members of the public, and celebrities themselves. Media, star power, and public opinion alone cannot create celebrity, but their interactions can and do. Media producers include journalists, photographers,

editors, publishers, directors, producers, and publicists, as well as fans who create original material about their idols and stars who take charge of their own images. Members of the public are so diverse that many scholars (I'm one of them) consider it more accurate to use the plural "publics."<sup>9</sup> Celebrities can range from microstars with 50,000 Instagram followers to superstars like Rihanna, who in 2018 had over 87 million followers on Twitter.



In the drama of celebrity, all three entities—publics, media producers, and stars themselves—have power, and all three compete *and* cooperate to assign value and meaning to celebrities and to those who take an interest in them. Each of the three groups can create, spread, and interpret artful representations of famous people and their followers. Each requires the others in order to play; each can resist and undermine the others or collaborate with and cater to them; and each can, at least temporarily, influence, succumb to, or dominate the other two groups. Sometimes these interactions reinforce dominant values, and figures such as Queen Victoria, Shirley Temple, and Pat Boone come to prominence. Just as often, the drama of celebrity enables its participants to elude social constraints and defy social norms, and outliers such as Oscar Wilde, Muhammad Ali, and Lady Gaga become stars. All three players in the drama of celebrity can form and execute intentions, express preferences, pass judgments, exercise intelligence, and demonstrate initiative. None has perfect power; none is perfectly powerless.

Consider Princess Diana and those who took an interest in her. In 1997, when thousands of people gathered outside Kensington Palace to mourn Diana's sudden death in a car crash (figure I.3), they participated in an event that was not simply staged for the public but created by it.<sup>10</sup> The spontaneous gathering attracted the media, whose coverage then gave voice to the mourners, ordinary people seeking to influence the actions of the royal family. The contest to define the meaning of Diana's death followed a decades-long tussle over who would define her life—itsself a



FIGURE I.3. Flowers and mourners at Kensington Palace after Diana's death, September 1997.

proxy for debates about what it meant to be a woman, a mother, a wife, a member of the elite, and, most fundamentally, a human being worthy of admiration. The participants in those debates included the other celebrities in Diana's orbit; the journalists reporting on Diana, often competing with one another for access to her and for the public's interest and attention; and the many people who identified, for diverse reasons, with a privileged person who nonetheless faced challenges similar to their own.

At the center of the struggle to define the princess stood Diana herself. Whether using a photo opportunity to demonstrate that it was safe to touch people with AIDS (figure I.4), leaking information to a biographer, or revealing in television interviews that her husband's infidelities had long preceded hers, Diana knew how to work with the press to reach the public. At her funeral, Diana's brother spoke for many when he accused the media of killing her, but few saw Diana as *simply* the press's victim. Many plausibly considered her a savvy self-presenter who understood contemporary media relations far better than did other members of the royal family. Nor was Diana a villainous mastermind; as biographer Tina Brown observed, one reason that Diana interacted so effectively with the tabloid press was that she herself avidly consumed it.<sup>11</sup>



FIGURE 1.4. Diana, Princess of Wales, and Martin, Mildmay Mission Hospital, February 24, 1989.

Because publics, members of the media, and celebrities themselves all actively shape what it means to be a celebrity and to be interested in celebrities, their contests are too evenly matched for their outcomes to be easily predicted. That unpredictability makes celebrity culture a suspenseful, interactive, serial drama. Though the drama of celebrity has momentary winners and losers, its contests never definitively end; the resulting suspense keeps millions engaged.<sup>12</sup> All three entities in the drama of celebrity have many moves at their disposal. Publics influence media coverage by deciding which stars to follow and which media to consume. They can send letters to editors, post online comments, or, in live settings, choose between boos and applause. Some fans create their own celebrity materials, but most content themselves with collecting and arranging materials produced by others. A few actively seek contact with stars or try to influence them by offering criticism, praise, and advice. Many prefer to idolize celebrities from afar and to experience them as transcendent and overpowering. Celebrities, too, vary in the degree of say they have over their self-presentation and careers. Some cede or lose control to photographers and journalists, while others obsessively craft their own personae and find ways to connect directly with publics. Journalists in turn can



position themselves as fans, critics, or influencers, and, in addition to framing how the public views celebrities, also shape how the public views fans. Media producers can even become celebrities themselves: think of gossip columnists Hedda Hopper and Walter Winchell, or photographers Richard Avedon and Annie Leibovitz.

Media companies and platforms do not simply create celebrities; they have to work with them. Well into the twenty-first century, heritage newspapers and magazines seeking to remain iconic brands ally themselves with celebrities in order to attract large followings, as when the *New York Times* and the *New Yorker* sponsor festivals that include television, film, and pop music stars. New media formats have long marketed themselves through celebrities already established in older ones.<sup>13</sup> In the 1890s, the manufacturers of Edison phonographic cylinders recorded dozens of celebrity voices in order to interest people in their new medium, and made sure that the packaging for their new product featured a photograph of renowned inventor Thomas Edison. Early short films attracted audiences by portraying famous royals, politicians, and stage actors.<sup>14</sup> Television, at its inception, featured stars already established in radio and film.<sup>15</sup> And twenty-first-century digital platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Tumblr, and YouTube expanded astronomically after pop stars Lady Gaga, Katy Perry, Beyoncé, Adele, Rihanna, and Taylor Swift began to use them.<sup>16</sup> Sites where the famous rubbed shoulders with the obscure combined the celebrity gala with amateur hour. Some B-list celebrities, such as Ashton Kutcher and Donald Trump, were drawn to Twitter because the relatively new platform helped them to bypass those standing guard at older ones. During the 2016 presidential primaries, many rightfully decried the free publicity that television and the press gave Trump. But the game of celebrity is not that simple, with established gatekeepers exercising top-down control over whom and what they cover. Faced with declining circulations, the press took advantage of Trump's savvy for galvanizing public attention.<sup>17</sup> In advertising Trump, news outlets also advertised themselves.

Journalists and editors make influential decisions about who gets free publicity and what kind of publicity that will be, but the biggest celebrities can break the most formidable company's stride. That is what Taylor Swift did in 2015, when with one Tumblr post—"We don't ask you for free iPhones"—she forced Apple to pay royalties to artists featured on its new music platform.<sup>18</sup> In 2018, singer Rihanna caused the shares of social media platform Snapchat to lose \$800 million in a single day when she used

Instagram, where she had over 60 million followers, to criticize a Snapchat game that had mocked her as a victim of intimate partner violence.<sup>19</sup>

Other celebrities outwit the media and their publics by concealing or spinning the facts. Joan Crawford successfully posed as a doting mother for decades; Prince hid his opioid addiction for years. This does not make those who take an interest in celebrity uniformly gullible or passive consumers. Some are skeptical of celebrities, while others push back against the press, as did the armies of “Beliebers” who stood ready in 2016 to defend pop singer Justin Bieber against the mildest criticism, only to turn against Bieber himself soon after.<sup>20</sup> Even the youngest fans enjoy influencing their idols. At age eleven, Grace Bedell wrote to President Abraham Lincoln, successfully suggesting that he grow a beard; child theatergoers convinced J. M. Barrie to change the stage version of *Peter Pan*.<sup>21</sup> Publics enjoy celebrity culture not as mere onlookers but as participants who care about outcomes that they help to determine but cannot fully control.

Adding to the drama of celebrity is the fact that each of its three players constitutes a diverse and internally fractious group. Media proliferate and borrow from one another, vie for influence and market share. Some celebrities join forces, as film stars Charlie Chaplin, Mary Pickford, and Douglas Fairbanks did when, in 1919, they formed United Artists with director D. W. Griffith. Others alternately compete and cooperate, as when great athletes face off against one another in regular-season matches but then join forces on All Star or national teams. Still others cooperate in ways that invite the public to compare them and assess who is best, as when different actors play the same roles on alternating nights. Stars can change direction and find their meanings altered, as when America’s beloved First Lady Jackie Kennedy morphed into America’s scarlet woman Jackie O. Publics are dynamic and heterogeneous; they do not think or act as one for very long. Fans can be fickle. Someone might gush about a celebrity in one breath and belittle them in the next. Subcultures resist being subsumed by the mainstream and abandon favorites when they become too popular. Niche markets form. Diehard fans argue among themselves, often fiercely, about the best Billy Joel song, whether Jennifer Aniston was better off with Justin Theroux or Brad Pitt, and who was the cutest Beatle. (In 1964, US teenagers voted for Ringo.)<sup>22</sup>

Individuals are also genuinely free to ignore celebrity culture, which makes the drama of who will receive our attention even more volatile and suspenseful. Some of us may feel like captive members of an involuntary

public, flooded with celebrity factoids we'd prefer to ignore. But we can opt out. Celebrities do not exist without publics, but publics can and do exist without celebrities. Usually, the most serious consequence for not recognizing a pop star or beloved athlete is a teenager's eye roll or a co-worker's incredulity. No one ever did time for ignoring One Direction or not liking Miley Cyrus. My seven-year-old nephew, on learning that I had never heard of his favorite college basketball player, exclaimed, "What? You've never heard of him? He's only, like, the best college player *in the world*." Seconds later, I had already forgotten the guy's name. My nephew is still talking to me.

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF MODERN CELEBRITY CULTURE

Modern celebrity culture began not with Hollywood, nor with the Internet, but in the eighteenth century, when the modern meanings of the words "celebrity" and "star" first became widespread. Famous people have existed for millennia, but the heroes of ancient Greece and Rome sought eternal renown, while medieval saints attained their canonical status only after death.<sup>23</sup> Celebrities are people known *during their lifetimes* to more people than could possibly know one another. For many centuries, rulers and conquerors were the primary celebrities. Only in the eighteenth century did publics begin to take a strong interest in a large number of living authors, artists, performers, scientists, and politicians.<sup>24</sup> In 1782, philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau published an autobiography in which he confessed to spanking fantasies, then complained that everyone was gossiping about him. After basing an 1812 poem on his own life, Lord Byron woke up to find himself famous. By the eighteenth century, a host of performers and authors had stalkers and groupies; by the nineteenth, many received hundreds of letters yearly requesting autographs. Nineteenth-century celebrity chef Alexis Soyer, a French cook based in London, sold his own brand of bottled sauces and put pictures of himself wearing his trademark red beret on the labels (figure I.5).<sup>25</sup> A century before the rise of radio and television commercials, celebrities endorsed wigs, face creams, powders, pianos, and bottled water. Well in advance of charity telethons and stadium concerts such as Live Aid, celebrities held benefits for victims of fires, earthquakes, and yellow fever.<sup>26</sup>



FIGURE 1.5. Nineteenth-century advertisement for Soyer's Sauce.

Americans were what he called “an individual-loving people.”<sup>28</sup> New visual media catered to that affection. In the 1860s, affordable, compact photographs of celebrities became widely available in shops and via mail order. In the 1890s, heavily illustrated niche magazines devoted to stage stars began to flourish, anticipating the movie magazines that became popular in the 1910s.<sup>29</sup>

Most importantly, democratization made people eager to track current events that they saw themselves as shaping.<sup>30</sup> Celebrity culture would not have taken off without newspapers, but far from imposing curiosity about famous individuals on the public, newspapers used an already existing fascination with celebrities to attract more readers. Until the 1830s, newspapers in England, France, and the United States were costly publications, sponsored by wealthy patrons and read by a small, select group of subscribers who received their papers by mail. In the 1830s, the news became more commercial. To increase circulation, publishers began to charge readers only a penny instead of the traditional six cents, and began

Why did modern celebrity culture emerge when it did? As literacy expanded dramatically among all classes in North America and Europe, so too did the number of those able to read about celebrities. As leisure time increased, more people had more time to visit the theaters, opera houses, and lecture halls where they saw celebrities in person.<sup>27</sup> Even more fundamentally, democratic movements in England, France, and the United States gave rise to a new emphasis on individuality. The Romantic cult of genius that ushered in the nineteenth century led to the fin de siècle worship of personality exemplified by Oscar Wilde. In 1911, a theater producer explicitly speculated that the star system loomed so large in the United States because

to rely on advertisements, subscriptions, and daily sales, including street sales, to turn a profit. Instead of targeting a select group of insiders willing to pay handsomely for exclusive, specialized information, the new penny press appealed to general interests in an effort to reach the largest number of readers possible.<sup>31</sup> Newspapers were so identified with celebrities that in 1841, when one of the most successful new penny papers purchased its own steamship in order to deliver news from across the Atlantic at record speeds, the publisher named it the *Fanny Elssler*, after a world-famous Austrian ballet dancer who had just toured the United States.<sup>32</sup> Steamships and newspapers helped celebrities to expand their fame; in turn, celebrities helped to attract publics to those novel forms of transport and communication.

As the number of commercial papers grew and competition for readers increased, newspapers found that they could not limit themselves to influencing readers; they also needed to please them.<sup>33</sup> Articles about celebrities, especially when illustrated with lithographs and engravings, were a reliable way to boost circulation.<sup>34</sup> An 1862 issue of the *Illustrated London News* covering the Prince of Wales's marriage sold 930,000 copies, more than three times the magazine's usual circulation rate.<sup>35</sup> Addressing journalism students in 1912, a US newspaperman explained, "In publishing a newspaper you endeavor to print what the people want to read."<sup>36</sup> The people wanted to read about celebrities. In turn, celebrities themselves became aware of the power of the press, even arguing with editors about their coverage. In 1829, for example, two popular actors sent a letter to a London newspaper, addressed "To the Publick," in which they accused the publication of misrepresenting them.<sup>37</sup> The editor published their letter to demonstrate his fairness and to avoid a libel suit, but he also published it because the actors were leading figures in London's theater scene, and celebrity sells.

At the very moment that newspapers first came to depend on publics for their success, technological changes in paper production and printing were making those publics larger than ever before. In the eighteenth century, the most successful newspapers had circulations in the low thousands and information still took weeks to travel between capital cities and the provinces. By 1825, a top-selling Parisian newspaper was reaching 16,000 subscribers; by 1880, the leading Paris daily had more than 500,000 readers.<sup>38</sup> Steamships and railways began to deliver newspapers to readers around the world with unprecedented speed. By the 1860s, transoceanic

telegraph cables enabled news to travel around many parts of the world almost instantaneously.<sup>39</sup> By the 1880s, a famous actress could get married in London and have the news published in Paris, Rio de Janeiro, and Chattanooga within a week.

The steamships and railways that delivered the news also delivered celebrities themselves. Many performers, authors, and reformers took advantage of the new mode of travel, crossing the Atlantic to conduct readings and deliver lectures that were nineteenth-century versions of twenty-first-century TED talks. Best-selling British novelist Charles Dickens visited the United States in 1842; in 1845, abolitionist Frederick Douglass traveled to England. Three decades later, extensive railway networks enabled celebrities to easily visit both a nation's major cities and its more obscure nooks and crannies. In the 1880s, star actors Edwin Booth (1833–1893) and Helena Modjeska (1840–1909) could perform in world theater capitals such as Paris, London, Berlin, Warsaw, and New York *and* in small towns ranging from Davenport, Iowa, to Zanesville, Ohio.<sup>40</sup> Performers spent so much time traveling that actor Maude Adams (1872–1953) had sliding scenery installed on her customized train car so that she and her troupe could rehearse between stops.

Cheap postage rates, photography, the penny press, telegraphic news agencies, and steam and train travel all provided channels through which celebrities, publics, journalists, and photographers could interact with one another. They did so long before the rise of the Hollywood studio system.<sup>41</sup> Far from creating modern celebrity culture, movie studios simply adapted one that the theater had invented decades earlier. “Star” was a nineteenth-century term coined in English, along with “étoile” and “vedette” in French, to designate a theatrical troupe's most compelling lead actors. In 1855, a young middle-class woman living in Glasgow announced, “Unless there is some Star in the theatre we do not go.”<sup>42</sup> In the twenty-first century, live theater has become a niche form of entertainment, albeit one still able to generate blockbusters such as *Hamilton*. But before the advent of film, millions of people regularly attended the theater each year. In 1865, London shows attracted almost twelve million viewers a year; in 1905, New York City alone had eighteen million theatergoers, with Boston, Philadelphia, and Chicago all competing to host equally vibrant theater scenes. In 1886, the United States had almost three hundred touring theater companies. By 1900, Paris and London each had over a hundred playhouses, many seating around three thousand people.<sup>43</sup> Theatrical networks were

global: a hit play might open in London, then travel through the United States; make the rounds of the British Empire; or start out in Paris, then be adapted for performance in Berlin, Stockholm, and New York.<sup>44</sup>

Not surprisingly, given the depth and breadth of the theatrical celebrity system, early film producers used stage stars to lure people to the new medium of cinema. The famous 1896 Thomas Edison film now known as “The Kiss” was originally billed “The May Irwin Kiss,” because it featured famous theater performer May Irwin in a popular scene from her hit play *The Widow Jones*. The very term “movie star” existed precisely because stars were presumed to belong to the theater. Many of the most famous early film producers, directors, and performers, including Lillian Gish, D. W. Griffith, Cecil B. DeMille, and Barbara Stanwyck, started on the stage, and some shuttled between Hollywood and Broadway for years.<sup>45</sup>

Though Hollywood did not invent stardom, it did briefly change celebrity culture in one important way. Nineteenth-century theatrical celebrities exercised significant autonomy. They had the power to choose their roles, control their schedules, select supporting casts, design costumes and sets, lease and manage theaters, and craft their public personae. From the 1930s through the 1950s, at the height of the studio system, a few freelance film stars, such as Carole Lombard and James Stewart, retained some of the independence enjoyed by their theatrical predecessors.<sup>46</sup> But most film moguls effectively used restrictive contracts, well-oiled publicity departments, and their influence over the press to control what movie stars could do and what the public could learn about them. During the decades when notoriously dictatorial studio heads Louis B. Mayer, the Warner Brothers, and Harry Cohn reigned supreme, many stars received orders about what roles to play, whom to date, and how to dress.<sup>47</sup> In exchange, they received the support of a powerful, integrated entertainment industry. Stars who balked, such as Bette Davis and Katharine Hepburn, often found themselves subject to retaliation, lawsuits, smear campaigns, and periods of unemployment.

The critics who produced the first serious analyses of celebrity in the 1930s and 1940s had two reference points: the authoritarian Hollywood studio system and the fascist, propaganda-driven personality cults formed around Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini. Not surprisingly, given those contexts, those who first theorized celebrity culture had little good to say about it. In 1944, Leo Lowenthal built on Adorno’s writings to suggest that nineteenth-century “heroes of production” renowned for their great

deeds had devolved into twentieth-century “idols of consumption” best known for the cars they drove and the soaps they bought.<sup>48</sup> Lowenthal got his history wrong—celebrity culture had always included heroes of production *and* idols of consumption—but his audience right. Intellectuals have been decrying the ills of celebrity culture ever since. Although towering figures such as Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall argued for popular culture’s utopian, redemptive potential, few have applied those more optimistic frameworks to celebrity culture. In 1977, when Richard Dyer established celebrity studies as an academic field, he took the studio system as paradigmatic of the many other forms of celebrity that preceded, followed, and coexisted alongside it.

Taking 1940s Hollywood as the norm has distorted our understanding of how celebrity culture works by making it seem inevitable that a concentrated power exploits and manipulates both celebrities and publics alike. Not only did Hollywood not invent celebrity, its version of celebrity culture was an aberration. The decline of the film studios in the 1960s, the breakdown of broadcast television that began in the 1980s, and the rise of the Internet since the 1990s have returned celebrity culture to its more anarchic nineteenth-century roots. Today, the fact that no single medium or industry controls stars or stardom has made more visible how strongly publics and celebrities have always influenced the course of celebrity culture and how their moves have been crucial to keeping it alive.

## SARAH BERNHARDT, THE GODMOTHER OF MODERN CELEBRITY CULTURE

No one shaped modern celebrity culture more than this book’s central figure: actress Sarah Bernhardt, a major star from the 1870s until her death, in 1923. No mere product of modern celebrity culture, Bernhardt also helped to produce it. With her genius for acting matched by a flair for self-promotion, Bernhardt became as well known in her lifetime as Charlie Chaplin, Marilyn Monroe, or Michael Jackson in theirs.<sup>49</sup> Born in Paris, in 1844, to a Dutch Jewish courtesan, she won admission at age sixteen to the prestigious Paris dramatic conservatory, and soon after secured a place in France’s revered national theater troupe, the Théâtre-Français. In the late 1860s and 1870s, Bernhardt became a celebrity throughout France, thanks to electrifying stage performances as a young male troubadour, a blind



grandmother in ancient Rome, a biracial woman avenging her enslaved mother, and a classic turn as Racine's *Phèdre*, who falls in love with her own stepson.

Bernhardt's enormous success owed much to the offstage publicity tactics that she devised to capture and hold the attention of the Parisian public. She arranged to be photographed in her own bedroom, sleeping in a coffin (figure I.6), and sat for dozens of other photographs and paintings. After embarking on a hot-air balloon trip in 1878, she wrote a book about it narrated from the perspective of a chair that accompanies her on that adventure. Until Bernhardt established her own acting company, in 1880, she

fought constantly with fellow actors and with theater managers; Parisian newspapers reveled in her many battles. By granting interviews and sending frequent letters to editors, Bernhardt sought to influence her press coverage. In 1878, she responded to one newspaper's speculations about her true hair color by dryly observing, "I regret that I cannot prove that I am a natural blonde."<sup>50</sup> In 1879, she considered suing another for claiming that she had not personally executed the paintings she had exhibited at the Paris Salon.<sup>51</sup>

Bernhardt's unusually slender physique, forceful personality, striking fashion sense, transparent ambition, and independence (she had a child without being married, and supported herself financially) ensured that her name, image, and personality attracted press coverage and public attention across France and beyond. Her fame expanded when, in June 1879, she traveled with the *Théâtre-Français* to London, where thousands—male and female, young and old, aristocratic and middle-class—contracted a major case of Bernhardt mania. Even when performing exclusively in French for audiences who barely understood a word of it, Bernhardt managed to captivate audiences with her exciting presence. Seeking to

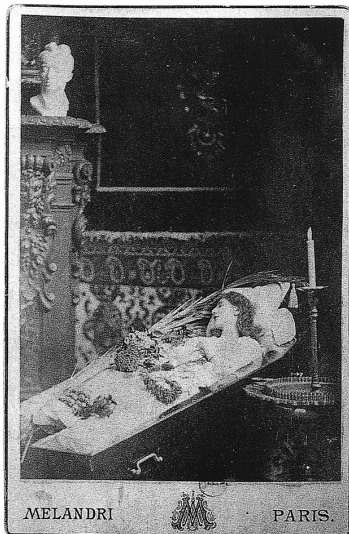


FIGURE I.6. Melandri, photograph of Sarah Bernhardt, circa 1876.

capitalize on her London success, theatrical agent Henry Edgardo Abbey made Bernhardt a lucrative offer to perform in the United States. The budding international star broke her contract with the Théâtre-Français and embarked on tours of Europe, provincial France, and North America that made her reputation and fortune and established her in a long independent career as a performer, director, and manager.<sup>52</sup> The rest is celebrity history. In 1923, a million mourners witnessed Bernhardt's funeral procession travel from her Paris home to Père Lachaise cemetery, and her name and image dominated international newspaper headlines and magazine covers for weeks after her death.

This book does not tell the story of Bernhardt's life. Instead, it tells the story of her stardom, in order to understand the modern celebrity culture that she helped to invent. Bernhardt appears in each chapter, surrounded not by friends, lovers, and family, as in a conventional biography, but by fans and haters, reporters and reviewers, editors and publishers, photographers and publicists. Each chapter also showcases other influential superstars who preceded and followed her: Lord Byron, Jenny Lind, Oscar Wilde, Marlon Brando, Marilyn Monroe, Elvis Presley, James Brown, the Beatles, Muhammad Ali, Madonna, Lady Gaga, and others. To understand Bernhardt's celebrity, I draw on multiple sources, some familiar, others novel. In charting Bernhardt's life and career, I have benefited greatly from the foundational work of Ernest Pronier, Gerda Taranow, John Stokes, Elaine Aston, Patricia Marks, Noelle Guibert, Carol Ockman, and Kenneth Silver, all authors of superb books on Bernhardt. Their studies make incisive observations about Bernhardt's celebrity. But each focuses on Bernhardt as a singular rather than a representative figure, and none sets out to offer a general theory and history of modern celebrity culture.

Like many before me, I have mined theater archives housed in libraries and museums around the world, from Paris and London to Melbourne and Rio de Janeiro, from New York and San Francisco to Cleveland and Columbus. Archives organized around stars, however, have one significant limitation: people start to collect materials about famous individuals only *after* they have become noteworthy enough to merit documentation. During the many months that I spent in the Bernhardt archives in Paris and London, I encountered almost no material from the years before she rocketed to international stardom, because no archivist would bother to clip articles about someone whose importance had yet to be established. Rich as these archives are, they cannot explain how someone *became* a star.

From the 1860s until the late 1870s, Bernhardt was a respected actress with loyal and enthusiastic followers among Parisians. By 1886, she was a household name on several continents. Her photographs sold by the thousands, her live appearances consistently broke box office records, and her name saturated the news. To understand how Bernhardt became a global celebrity, I tracked down news items published *before* she became the nineteenth century's supreme star, a task facilitated by the recent digitization of many French, British, and US newspapers and magazines. Many of the materials I discuss here are cited for the first time, and allow us to chart how Bernhardt became so famous that for several decades, British newspapers accorded her almost twice the coverage bestowed on Charles Dickens, a native son and best-selling author.<sup>53</sup>

Because celebrity culture is a contest and collaboration among publics, media, and celebrities, newspaper clippings can never be transparent sources of information about a celebrity's personality or achievements. Whether examining how nineteenth-century cartoonists portrayed Oscar Wilde and Sarah Bernhardt or how twentieth-century photographers and reporters wrote about Beatles and Elvis Presley fans, I interpret news items as tactics by journalists, reviewers, and illustrators, approved by editors and publishers, all eager to play a determining role in celebrity's endlessly evolving drama.

Understanding celebrity culture also requires studying the public responses that help to make and break stars, no easy task for the eras before official fan clubs and Internet comments. To learn more about what publics thought about celebrities, I turned to sources rarely used to chart the history of celebrity: scrapbooks, nineteenth-century fan mail, and life writing, a portmanteau genre that includes biographies, diaries, and memoirs. Thanks to the increased literacy and leisure time that characterized the nineteenth century, we have many firsthand accounts written by middle- and upper-class people who dreamed about celebrities and even chased them down streets. Thousands of ordinary theatergoers maintained albums dedicated to recording frequent trips to the theater, and those volumes are an especially precious but overlooked resource for historians of theater and of celebrity (figure I.7).<sup>54</sup>

Scrapbooks perform the invaluable service of placing individual celebrities such as Bernhardt in the context of dozens of other, lesser-known performers. They also offer important information about how audiences interacted with an ever-expanding realm of entertainment and entertainment



FIGURE 1.7. Clippings of Julia Marlowe as Lady Macbeth, TRI Scrapbook #111.

journalism. Whenever possible I have cited newspaper articles found in albums, because the fact that an actual theatergoer clipped and preserved them increases their historical significance. Today, the albums preserved in rare book collections often sit neglected, yellowing and crumbling, but these underused sources have a rare capacity to communicate the passionate feelings that celebrities aroused over a century ago. For that reason, scrapbooks play a starring role in many of the chapters to follow.

## PREVIEW OF COMING ATTRACTIONS

Unlike most histories of celebrity culture, which focus on change over time, this book highlights continuities, features that have held more or less steady for nearly two centuries, their lease on life renewed with each media revolution. To be sure, much has changed since Bernhardt's heyday. Where her critics lambasted her for being too thin, today's stars find themselves mocked for gaining extra ounces. Most nineteenth-century celebrities were adult men, artists and leaders lauded for their talent and genius, viewed by many as captains of their own fates who deserved their

outsized renown. By the twenty-first century, the typical celebrity had become a young female entertainer, often seen as simultaneously exploited and exploitative, and celebrity itself, though still prized, had acquired damningly pejorative connotations. But while many fine points differentiate YouTube celebrities, Hollywood stars, and nineteenth-century theater icons, much has stayed the same since the popular press and commercial photography spawned the first modern celebrities. Now as then, celebrity results from interactions between media producers, publics, and individuals seeking fame or trying to increase it. Sarah Bernhardt, along with those who represented and followed her, invented many of the features of celebrity culture that remain in place to this day. She was one of the first figures to use modern media to achieve truly global celebrity by courting controversy, imitation, and evaluation, as well as one of the first to affect crowds so strongly that many journalists found her supporters alarming. As a pathbreaker who established a template for modern stardom that remains in effect, Sarah Bernhardt was, as celebrities so often are, simultaneously representative and unique.

Each chapter of *The Drama of Celebrity* examines a distinctive configuration of the triangular dramas that define celebrity culture. Chapter 1, “Defiance,” asks why large segments of the public so often identify with people who break the rules, even when the press scoffs at the renegades. Chapter 2, “Sensation,” explores how journalists and publics alike have long relished the experience of being overpowered by sublimely compelling performers, and asks what celebrities do to have such thrilling effects. Not all journalists approve of the outsized influence that celebrities wield over the public, and chapter 3, “Savagery,” shows how media workers eager to challenge star power have long depicted celebrities as unable to control their admirers, whom the press depicts, often in racially charged ways, as violent, unruly outlaws. Chapter 4, “Intimacy,” explores how fans seek closeness with celebrities. Some are content to collect, arrange, and bask in materials created by photographers, theater producers, and journalists. Others aim to breach the inherent distance between the anonymous many and the celebrated few by writing letters and bestowing gifts. A rare few contact their favorite stars directly, often to make sexual proposals.

Chapter 5, “Multiplication,” explores how celebrity emerges from modern media processes that make replication an engine of singularity. In the 1930s, cultural critic Walter Benjamin argued that the mechanical reproduction of images had destroyed the aura around ancient art objects.

However, his theory also helps us understand the particularly modern halo that surrounds multiples, so that the more copies there are of a person's face or words, the more distinctive he or she appears to be. Chapter 6, "Imitation," focuses on how members of the public seek to emulate celebrities, arguing that the freedom to imitate stars has often been a racial and gender privilege. The final chapters advance what may be this book's most controversial arguments. Chapter 7, "Judgment," shows that publics and journalists often carefully evaluate and rank celebrities' merits, in ways both subjective and objective. Chapter 8, "Merit," demonstrates that many celebrities, far from seeking to hoodwink the media and public, encourage publics and media workers to accurately judge their strengths and weaknesses by comparing them to other celebrated figures.

Celebrity culture is the result of celebrities, publics, and media workers battling and backing one another, uniting and dividing in ways whose outcome can never be foretold with certainty. Agency is everywhere in celebrity culture, and always up for grabs. The resulting mix of familiarity and suspense, reassurance and surprise, is compelling, even addictive. So is the sense that, as members of various publics, our actions—positive, negative, and neutral—help to decide who becomes a celebrity. Whether we love celebrity culture or hate it, follow it avidly or consider it a bore, the drama of celebrity implicates us all. No wonder it keeps so many of us riveted.

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