theories and methodologies

The Doubting-Thomas Effect

JOSEPH ROACH

CHARISMATIC CELEBRITIES HAVE OPEN WOUNDS. FANS HAVE PROBING FINGERS. DRAWN TOGETHER BY DOUBT, AS IN CARAVAGGIO'S *THE Incredulity of Saint Thomas*, they collaborate in hopes of reassurance. The baroque painter shows Christ guiding the hand of the doubting apostle, who finds the bloodless hole and inserts his index finger up to the second knuckle. The quizzical expression on Thomas's face highlights by contrast Christ's patient indulgence as they come together in an impromptu ritual of verification, initiating what a recent theorist of celebrity calls the Saint Thomas effect, which describes the need of fans for intimate authentication, insisting, as they tend to do, on all the gory details (Rojek 62). The deep contradictions at the heart of celebrity incite this relentless probing: a divine being, apparently not at all like them (having risen from the dead, for instance), may prove in crucially titillating ways to be just like them after all. But what the millions of fingers seek they never satisfactorily find. For the celebrity to remain celebrated, the contradiction that defines his or her mystery must remain in continual uncertainty, flickering between highlight and shadow, visibility and invisibility, teasing the eyes of the beholders and leaving them in doubt, like the searing effect of Caravaggio's chiaroscuro, which catches Saint Thomas at a moment of suspense, still undecided between skepticism and belief.

As a topic worthy of serious literary or historical study, celebrity has recently attracted its own skeptical apostles as well as true believers (Morgan), and even the admissibility of performers or performances into the practice of literary criticism remains under vigilant scrutiny (Culler). The two issues are linked by the resilience of antitheatrical prejudice in a discipline, literary study, that has been defined for so long by the apparent autonomy of written texts. At its best, Jonathan Culler maintains, literary criticism, eschewing raucous mimetic forms of art in favor of silently expressive ones, consists of the explication of a voiceless artifact: "the work is mute, and the critic must speak for it" (906). But is there no one else besides the critic who may speak for the work? Is there no one who may speak not only

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for it but also through it? Generously, the first example Culler gives of a poetic work is one that cannot be said to exist as itself apart from the performance of it: "The rise of rap, which shows no sign of disappearing, highlights the importance of those formal structures most prominent in performance and suggests the possibility of reverting to a notion of the work as act of language" (907–08). Integral to the rise of rap are the personality and performance style of the celebrity rapper, and Culler further allows that new media open up myriad possibilities of mimetic as well as expressive interaction, "transforming texts as readers perform them." Here, at play among "electronic systems," the reader-performer would presumably be not "reverting" regressively to a superannuated notion of the literary work but presciently reimagining it as "an event" (907). Here, as in Elin Diamond's incisive definition of performance, literature is "a doing *and* a thing done" (1; emphasis added).

Historicizing his priority of critical paradigms, Culler traces the rise of true literary criticism to the "revolutionary time of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries," which defined criticism by eliminating performance from consideration (905). But that era coincides precisely with the rise of theatrical and literary celebrity that has been a topic of important new research by scholars for whom literature is still a central critical concern, including several of the contributors to this issue. For instance, in Emily Anderson's account of the multigeneric life of Shylock—as a role, as a personality-driven role-icon on the stage, and as a cultural effigy off the stage—a well-known literary work passes consequentially through the hands of different celebrities who reshape its received meaning through performance. Comprehensive literary criticism ought to be able to account for the ways in which a dramatic character is a textual effect refracted through the creative temperaments of performers. In that vein, Julia Fawcett shows the special debt that Richard III owes to Colley Cibber's personal peculiarities and to his innovative techniques of "overexpressing" them. Combining literary criticism with theatrical history, moreover, Felicity Nussbaum has conclusively demonstrated the importance of celebrity actresses in defining the mimetic and expressive possibilities of eighteenth-century literary production, and in that she joins other theater-positive literary and cultural historians (Conway; Freeman; Perry; Russell; Straub; Tillyard; and Wanko). Drama and the theatrical dimensions of fiction and poetry figure prominently in the work of these scholars, who understand that drama is not a voiceless artifact even in the reading of it: plays since the eighteenth century have been printed with the names of actors and actresses beside the names of the characters they acted. In fact, celebrity and celebrity performance remained part of literature and, perforce, literary criticism in the late eighteenth century and beyond. Even Samuel Johnson, Charles Lamb, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and William Hazlitt, who were critical and sometimes contemptuous of the stage, referred to it in their criticism. When Lamb came to the conclusion that Shakespeare's plays ought not to be staged, he did so with a rueful but clear acknowledgment of the power of celebrity: "We speak of Lady Macbeth," he wrote, "while in reality we are thinking of Mrs. S." (97). Lamb puts performers back into criticism on the strength of their notoriety, not their celebrity; but, like the heroes of ancient times, they could not remain established prominently in the public eye for long without showing their wounds.

As Achilles was a more compelling hero because of his heel, not in spite of it, so modern celebrities succeed by the unresolved copresence of mutually exclusive attributes—strength and vulnerability, innocence and experience, singularity and typicality, among them. The novelist George Meredith tellingly described the beguiling contradictions of charismatic attraction in a packed phrase,

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"poignant antiphony," when he wrote of the character of Renée de Rouaillout, rival lover of the hero in *Beauchamp's Career* (1876), that "she touched the double chords within us which are we know not whether harmony or discord, but a divine discord if an uncertified harmony, memorable beyond plain sweetness or majesty" (331). The rise of celebrity is coextensive with the secularization of charisma. To make a living today, an actor learns in conservatory that contradictory attributes need to remain copresent because their antagonism cannot be foreclosed without loss of dramatic interest: strength without vulnerability is boring; vulnerability without strength is just disgusting; but strength and vulnerability in dynamic juxtaposition—not too tart, not too sweet—will sell like Coca-Cola. As for contemporary consumers of celebrity, the doubting Thomases of grocery checkout lines, authoritative sites of popular culture continue to acknowledge the need of fans to defer indefinitely the promised resolution of contradiction into oneness, as a recent article in *O: The Oprah Magazine* attests: "A supremely charismatic person has two sides: He or she is warm *and* tough, strong *and* vulnerable, down-to-earth *and* one of a kind. Think JFK, or FDR—or think of the most charismatically well-endowed man in contemporary popular culture: Don Draper of *Mad Men* (played by Jon Hamm), who is wounded yet stoic, ardent yet repressed, a suave man of means hiding a hardscrabble past" (Winter 217). *O* might have invited the reader to think of Oprah herself—divinely unapproachable but down-to-earth at the same time. In his magisterial *The Frenzy of Renown: Fame and Its History* (1986), Leo Braudy traces the gradual (and still-incomplete) metamorphosis of fame from sacred monarchy to modern celebrity. Noting the efficacy of the "dual-body concept," which inscribed Christ's duality on the medieval king's supposed two bodies, the *body politic* and the *body natural*, Braudy accounts for the subsequent duality of secular renown (215–17). Significantly, contemporary celebrities such as Oprah Winfrey are known to the public intimately, like saints and royals, by their first names.

The contradiction known as "public intimacy" is the crux of the doubting-Thomas effect (Roach 3, 16–17). The promise of availability created by the apparent familiarity of celebrities excites both the belief and the skepticism of fans. Celebrities may appear tangible to them, sometimes more so than their acquaintances, whose embarrassing secrets, if known, lack the sustaining interest of dual-bodied contradiction. Nussbaum develops the idea of public intimacy into a critical principle for assessing actresses' performances in the eighteenth century—"the interiority effect." She argues that the subtext celebrity actresses generated by drawing attention to their individual personalities and private affairs "allowed the theater to compete with other nascent forms of reflective inwardness—such as the epistolary novel, the periodical, and autobiographical writing—in fostering and revealing a sense of individuality and intimacy" (19). Known to eighteenth-century actors and audiences as "by-play," such subtextual expression has two forms, absorptive and interactive. In absorption, the performer shows the character lost in thought, but the occasion, a soliloquy in silence, actually allows for the performer to demonstrate personal virtuosity and magnetic attraction. David Garrick excelled at these absorptive displays, while Sarah Siddons outdid all rivals in the sleepwalking scene in *Macbeth*. In interaction, unspoken thought passes as if by telepathy between scene partners. Frances Abington was a noted subtextual interlocutor, and she was immortalized as such by Joshua Reynolds in *Mrs. Abington as Miss Prue* (1771), in which Miss Prue, in William Congreve's *Love for Love,* receives a lesson in love from Tattle. In critical conversation with Nussbaum, Julia Fawcett raises the interiority effect to another level of technical virtuosity by celebrity

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actors. Pursued by the ever-increasing scrutiny of prurient fans—published accounts of actors, beginning with Barton Booth, even included shamefully intimate details from their autopsies—actors and literary celebrities such as Laurence Sterne and Alexander Pope invented ways of misleading their tormentors by appearing to expose themselves only to substitute surreptitiously what Fawcett calls "overexpression" (35–39). Overexpression is a defensive disguise, a complicated strategy of self-expression through self-erasure marshaled by the most skillful manipulators of artifice imaginable. By means of such camouflage, celebrities kept from public exposure the most closely guarded and potentially damaging secret of their private lives: that there is no secret; that deep down they're shallow; that beneath their thin veneers are thin veneers. Fawcett's idea of overexpression as sleight of hand returns celebrity to the Saint Thomas effect by offering fans the illusion of depth and giving performers the prosthetic techniques to create that illusion. To attract fingers, wounds must be plumbless.

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