



THE OXFORD RESEARCH CENTRE IN THE HUMANITIES



UNIVERSITY OF  
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OXFORD CENTRE FOR LIFE-WRITING

# Female Celebrity and Life-Writing

Saturday, 4 November 2017, 2-6pm

Leonard Wolfson Auditorium, Wolfson College, Linton Road, OX2 6UD

## Abstracts and Bio Notes

### Patricia Duncker, "The Women Who 'Meant to Do It': George Eliot and Celebrity Performance"

In this lecture, I consider George Eliot's reconfiguration of nineteenth-century plots, and her use of the woman-in-error plot rather than the seduced-and-betrayed plot. I discuss the tensions between biography and fiction in the context of my biographical historical novel about George Eliot, *Sophie and the Sibyl* (2015). Both biography and fiction give us the opportunity to settle scores with our adversaries. Why, if I am hostile to Eliot's fictional sexual / textual politics have I never relinquished my role as her admiring reader? The answer lies in her representation of two celebrity performers, who, despite their marginal presence in her great works, have always claimed my full attention.

**Patricia Duncker** is a writer and academic. Her novels include *Hallucinating Foucault* (1996), which won the Dillons First Fiction Award and the McKitterick Prize and has been translated into fourteen languages; *James Miranda Barry* (1999); *The Deadly Space Between* (2002); and, most recently, *Sophie and the Sibyl* (2015), a biofictional exploration of nineteenth-century literary celebrity and fandom. She is a Professor Emeritus of Contemporary Literature in the Department of English, American Studies and Creative Writing at the University of Manchester, where she has worked since 2007. Before coming to Manchester, she was Professor of Creative Writing at the University of East Anglia, where she taught the MA in Creative Writing alongside fellow novelists Andrew Cowan, Paul Magrs and Michèle Roberts.

### Stella Tillyard, "Celebrities and Heroines: Commercial Biography and 18<sup>th</sup>-Century Women"

From the mid-1990s onwards, most commercial biographies of eighteenth-century women have portrayed them as 'celebrities' or 'heroines'. Why? In this short talk I am going to suggest that the commercial imperative towards these tropes reflected and was prompted by the idea that women writers could sell books and succeed by selling their own femininity and portraying both writer and subject as celebrities. Twenty years later, inequalities within hierarchies of writing, within the publishing industry and within the ways in which we write, edit, and consume such work persist.

**Stella Tillyard** was educated at Oxford University, where she studied English Literature. Her PhD on twentieth-century art criticism, completed in 1985, was published as *The Impact of Modernism* in 1987. She is the author of *Aristocrats* (1994), a biography of four eighteenth-century sisters, which won the *History Today* Award, the Fawcett Prize and the Meilleur Livre Etranger and was made into a BBC/WGBH Masterpiece Theatre series in 2000. Her subsequent books include *Citizen Lord*, the life of Lord Edward Fitzgerald (1998, shortlisted for the Whitbread Prize), *A Royal Affair* (2006), about George III and his siblings, and her novel *Tides of War* (2011).

### **Ruth Scobie, “Pre-Truth Media and the Female Imposter: The Case of ‘Elizabeth Harriet Grieve’”**

In the 1760s and 1770s, the notorious ‘Harriet Grieve’ created an aristocratic persona for herself through the mass media. Existing only in print advertisements, fictitious newspaper stories, and fragments of performance, Grieve’s status as an elite power broker was a troubling, uproarious reminder of the power of a ‘pre-truth’ celebrity culture to obscure and even reshape social order, transforming a female nobody, albeit temporarily, into a disembodied voice who could invade, enthrall, and steal from households all over England. This paper will attempt to piece together the story of Grieve’s mysterious career, and will examine its gendered representation in poetry and on stage.

**Ruth Scobie** is a lecturer in English Literature at Mansfield College, Oxford. Her research focuses on ideas of fame and public knowledge, especially in relation to the exotic, empire, and exploration. From 2013 to 2016 she ran the Oxford Celebrity Research Network, and is currently completing a book on eighteenth-century and Romantic celebrity and representations of Oceania.

### **Mary Luckhurst, “Staging Lives: Celebrity Actresses Playing Real-Life Celebrities”**

Actresses have been assigned significant and particular cultural value in modern western democracies and are integral to our understanding of constructions of fame and cultural identity. The contemporary market for the consumption of real lives has led to an increasing demand for actresses to play or impersonate real people. In this paper I reflect on how playing a real-life celebrity can be shrewd career development and how complex stagings of dual celebrity identities can be very effective strategies in the construction of forging star identity.

**Mary Luckhurst** is Professor of Artistic Research and Creative Practice at the University of Melbourne. She is a theatre director, writer, theatre historian, and a pioneer of practice as research. She is a specialist in modern drama and her many books include *Dramaturgy: A Revolution in Theatre*; *Theatre and Celebrity*; *Theatre and Ghosts: Materiality, Performance, and Modernity*, as well as two Blackwells Companions on British and Irish Theatre. She is currently a Women in the Humanities Visiting Professor at TORCH.

### **Oline Eaton, “God Bless Jackie—The Only Thing that Can Make Us Forget the Bomb”**

In this talk, I will analyze representations of shopping in the life-narrative of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis—particularly as regards evidence. Examination of this theme across contemporary press accounts and the biographical record will open up questions regarding the writing of biography, the ways we write women’s lives, and the effects of the simplifications of ‘celebrity biography’ on portrayals of female lives.

**Oline Eaton** teaches media and culture, and is based at the Centre for Life-Writing Research at King’s College London. She is writing a biography of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis and has recently published work in the *Journal of American Studies* and the *Journal of American Culture*. In 2015, she co-organised the TORCH/OCLW conference “After-Image: Life-Writing and Celebrity.”

### **Hannah Yelin, “Celebrity Performativity and Cultural Value: Reading Grace Jones’ *I’ll Never Write My Memoirs*”**

This paper examines Grace Jones’ 2015 memoir as an example which contravenes the structuring tendency in both celebrity culture and autobiography to claim to offer up access to an authentic self, or show the ‘real woman’ behind the public image. I shall use Jones’ autobiographical self-presentation to put forward the idea of ‘*doing* celebrity’: whereby celebrity and pop stardom are presented as a deliberately constructed set of actions and behaviours, rather than an ontology: celebrity as something one does, not something one is. Moreover, we shall see Jones’ embrace of performativity over authenticity as something that is situated as being part of a wider art practice: a move which makes claim to the status of creative agent and author of the star image, seeking a level of cultural value otherwise often denied to the figure of the female pop star celebrity.

**Hannah Yelin** is Lecturer in Media and Culture for the Department of Culture, Media and Communication at Oxford Brookes University. She is currently completing a monograph, entitled *Subjectivity for Sale: The Gender Politics of Ghosted Celebrity Memoir*, which explores the implications of ghostwriting for the way we understand access, agency, authenticity, authorship and their gendered parameters. She is also running the “Celebrity Culture Club”, a series of events bringing together academics and people working in the media to discuss the urgent questions of the day relating to celebrity culture.