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Antoine Lilti, *Figures publiques. L'invention de la célébrité (1750-1850)*. Paris: Fayard, 2014. 430 p. Notes, index. \$35.94 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-2-213-68238-9.

Review essay by Rachel Brownstein, CUNY

Two of the too few color illustrations in Antoine Lilti's otherwise satisfying discussion of the invention of celebrity are of the same person, an Englishwoman born in 1765 called Amy Lyon or Lyons, then Emma Hart, and finally Emma, Lady Hamilton, famously the mistress of the naval hero Lord Nelson—*That Hamilton Woman*, as the title of the 1941 film starring Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh has it. The phrase begins to suggest Lilti's point: the focus of (often morbid) curiosity as well as admiration, a celebrity inspires both envy and dismissive derision.

The daughter of a blacksmith, fatherless from infancy, Amy misspent her youth in restaurants, theatres, and bordellos, then was set up in London by Charles Greville, an upper-class young man, as Emma Hart (he changed her name). Greville's mistress became the muse of the fashionable painter George Romney, Joshua Reynolds's rival, and (rather less chastely than Henry Higgins and his sidekick) the two savvy men shaped the raw girl into a lady. Painted in charming décolletage or classical drapery, Romney's model usually posed as either an abstraction (Nature or Sensibility) or a classical figure (Circe, Cassandra, Ariadne). When Greville decided to marry an heiress, he transferred his mistress to his uncle Sir William Hamilton, the English ambassador to Sicily, who married Amy (she signed the register with her original name). Sir William was a connoisseur and collector of art and antiquities—and at sixty rather an antique himself, compared to his twenty-six-year-old trophy wife. The couple entertained lavishly in a baronial house in Sicily where, draped as if for Romney, Emma after dinner struck her famous expressive attitudes, one-woman *tableaux vivants*. And she fell in love with an honored guest, the British admiral Horatio Nelson.

Emma nursed Nelson back to health after he was wounded in the Battle of the Nile. Sir William stood proudly at her side. The love of the hero and the Lady (both married to other people) was soon legendary: they were the most famous couple in the world. After Sir William left his post, he and Emma and her mother lived with Nelson in England. Lady Hamilton gave birth to Lord Nelson's daughter Horatia (the name gave away her parentage) but refused even to consider a divorce that might taint the hero's reputation. Although Sir William died a few years before Nelson himself died of his wounds at Trafalgar in 1805, the lovers never did marry.

The ironies fairly leap out at us now (as from Lilti's point of view they did then): Emma as the creation of a succession of men; the actress manquée—she never did appear on the boards—idealized as a symbol, then paired and confounded with the symbol of the

nation, the private and public reversed. (Lilti has profited from many academic feminist analyses of French and English actresses of the period.) See the child sold first by her mother, then herself; see the besotted painter make images (engraved and widely disseminated) of his model in different roles; see her invent her own art form, her “attitudes”; see the woman-as-work-of-art acquired by the rich collector, and then the beauty of still life triumphantly finding a self-expressive narrative of her own, a love affair with a hero maimed in his country’s service; see the true lovers adored by one another and by that representative of the British nation and its Greco-Roman cultural heritage, Sir William Hamilton.

Amy/Emma, Lady Hamilton, Romney’s model for Circe and Nature is a paradigmatic public figure, representative of Woman and Art and Aristocracy, notorious for her scandalous private life, made up in London, the birthplace of print culture, in the first age of mechanically reproduced images. Her multiple names and postures neatly suggest her significances: as the Roman poet Virgil put it, *varium et mutabile, semper femina*.

Virgil is evoked by one of the two images of Lady Hamilton in Lilti’s volume: “Dido in Despair!” (1801), by James Gillray, is on the same page as an 1782 portrait by Romney of Emma as Circe. Gillray’s older, fatter Emma is comically distracted, being deserted (like Dido, Queen of Carthage) as Nelson (like Aeneas) pursues his heroic destiny (the battleships are right outside her window). The analogy was apt as the caricature was published in 1802 when Nelson was called to the on-again-off-again war against Napoleon: although Emma was not quite a sailor’s wife, as Jane Austen’s Anne Elliot is at the end of *Persuasion*, like Anne’s her domestic life was subject to patriotic alarms.

In both representations the lady wears white muslin and bears the name of a temptress in a classical epic. Otherwise these images could not be more different: one idealizes and the other ridicules the woman. Two conclusions suggest themselves: a sad one about mortality and the other a bracing one about the satirist’s iconoclastic irreverence. A third point, Lilti’s, is that celebrities reflect ambivalent desires. The clever pairing illustrates the first part of his argument that in its beginnings as it is now celebrity was shot through with ironies; it also neatly illuminates his second point, that celebrity culture figured crucially in England and France at the moment when Enlightenment neo-classicism gave way to Romanticism—what Frederick A. Pottle, in 1946, called a “shift in sensibility.”

Full of nosy details, Gillray’s caricature features a book on the window seat open to an engraving of a nude female body in a suggestive “attitude” (as the open book says). Hard to see in the shadows behind the distraught “Dido!” is a sleeping husband in a nightcap—presumably Sir William Hamilton. Under the picture are the lyrics of a still-popular song about a lover gone to the wars; inside the frame are the detritus of a lady’s dressing room (a discarded stocking, a pot of rouge, and wine for the aging beauty) and a litter of antiquities, Sir William’s stuff. (Gillray did another famous caricature of Sir William as a connoisseur examining a statue). Gillray was deliberately offensive about Emma’s size—as he was about Queen Charlotte’s boniness—but misogyny doesn’t explain everything: fat and skinny, big and little, are as Ernst Gombrich pointed out, basic weapons in the cartoonist’s armory. Gillray’s famous fatties include the King and the

Prince Regent and Charles James Fox, who in “Stealing off” (1795) is caught in a stiffened posture of distress, with hands and feet splayed, that resembles Dido’s. (See also the stiff black hands and feet in Gillray’s disturbing “Barbarities in the West Indies” (1791): the cartoonist attacks as well by disassembling the body into pieces.)

The fun of Lilti’s subject is, of course, in the details. *Figures publiques* is rich in anecdotes from scandal sheets and memoirs, *faits divers* about Voltaire and Rousseau, Hazlitt and Mrs. Siddons. Its analysis of celebrity is both dishy and serious. The author aims to counter the broader view of Leo Braudy, whose *The Frenzy of Renown* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986) confounded celebrity with fame (which he traced back to Augustus Caesar’s image on coins). More pointedly, he argues against Marxist theorists—starting with Guy Debord—who see celebrity as a construct of a modern or post-modern society of the spectacle, specifically the new media. Exploring the importance of political personalities, urban theatricals, journalism, and commodity culture in the second part of the eighteenth century and the first part of the nineteenth, Lilti works at distinguishing celebrity from both fame (*gloire*) and reputation, arguing that it always involves an illusion of personal intimacy (think Kardashians). He writes insightfully about how celebrity was invented (and enjoyed) by Voltaire and Rousseau, Johnson and Boswell.

He also points to the parallel between the invention of celebrity and the rise of the novel, and specifically (if briefly) to the importance of Samuel Richardson, himself a printer, who matched the proliferating images of public people with fictions about private life that explored individual subjectivity. There is much more to be said about the parallel. “Nobody’s Story,” as Catherine Gallagher called fictions about obscure individuals (such as Pamela), was popular in precisely the period that marked the rise of celebrities or “somebodies.” Just like Benjamin Franklin’s images, the fictional Pamela’s image adorned cups and saucers and decorated fans. Like the portraits and caricatures consumers admired, novels in Richardson’s tradition emphasized the erotic aspects of social hierarchies and the play between private and public life. Idealized or caricatured, these images of individuals encouraged speculation about the hidden inner lives of “real” characters—public persons and the people they knew.

Like visual artists, novelists explored character—evoked and invented characters—appealing now to the sympathetic imagination and then to the taste for comedy and caricature. Jane Austen began to write fiction in the 1780s and worked at balancing these views. Arguably the novel developed readers’ sympathies for other people; as surely, for good and for ill, it made people see their neighbors as characters. “For what do we live,” Mr. Bennet asks rhetorically in *Pride and Prejudice*, “but to make sport for our neighbors, and laugh at them in our turn?”

Around 1750, in France and England, human nature did not exactly change, but somehow it did become the consensus that, as Alexander Pope had put it, the proper study of mankind is man. Long before anthropology and psychology were invented, actors and writers and visual artists were thinking about exactly what it was to be an individual with a name or identity, a fictional character or a real character or from another point of view a

caricature. “Creating” inhabitants of fictional worlds where we can study them without the blinders and astigmatism imposed by self-interest, novelists and visual artists mirrored Enlightenment-Romantic readers and constructed their ways of seeing themselves and one another.

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