Editorial

SIMON AVERY & ANDREW MAUNDER (Guest Editors)

> One of our own noted *litteratuers* once said to me: 'The public want personalities. If you would please them voila!' And when a man who has to make up a weekly letter hears a fresh dart of hot scandal hissing through the air he breathes, he must be a brave fellow not to catch it, fold it up in his missive, and so hurl it at the victim as many times as he has numbers of readers. It is hard not to do it. But he is brave if he refrains.
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> ('The Editor's Table', *Harper's Magazine*, October 1860: 700)[1]

In October 1860, the New York-based magazine, *Harper's New Monthly*, offered its readers this scathing commentary on the apparently morbid tendency among their British cousins to delve into the private lives of famous men and women. The magazine's onslaught was both topical and contentious. The pleasures and punishments of fame experienced by such victimised 'lions' as Charles Dickens and Edward Bulwer Lytton, together with the public's apparent right to 'know' everything, struck the writer as not only 'vulgar' but as clear evidence (if any were needed) of a degenerate culture. The situation was bad in America but much worse in Britain for there, as *Harper's* noted, 'John Bull is very fond of . . . talking about the private history of public men – prying into their bathing-tubs and counting the moles upon their necks.' In the name of both art and decency, *Harper's* made the following plea: 'For the honour of the guild – for the fair name of literature – let us have done with peeping through keyholes and listening at cracks.'[2]

In this issue of *Critical Survey*, scholars from both Britain and North America analyse examples of the kinds of nineteenth-century literary celebrity, fame and notoriety which magazines like *Harper's* claimed to find so disturbing. One hundred and forty years on, and as our own worship of celebrity reaches near boiling point, these scholars approach their topics from a variety of critical and theoretical positions. In the first essay here, John Plunkett offers an important contribution to our understanding of the relationship between print culture and royal populism as it manifested itself in Queen Victoria's relationship with the media. In arguing that the modernity of Victoria's figure engendered an extraordinary contemporary discourse upon the media-making of the young monarch in the 1830s and 1840s, Plunkett details the conflicting meanings which Victoria held for her subjects and those who wrote about her, stressing the extent to which the her life was turned into and consumed as a spectacle of 'personality'. He draws links between the ways in which twentieth-century Hollywood film stars are often characterised as performative figures created by an industry of dreams, and the nineteenth-century media's responses to Victoria, provoked in large part by the many royal portraits which accentuated her glamour and desirability. Both responses express what Christine Gledhill has called 'the intimacies of individual personality, inviting desire and identification.' Yet as Plunkett also notes, while the subjective investment poured into Victoria in the 1830s and 1840s promoted a sense of intimate connection and empathy, the greater the degree of investment, the more she risked being turned into a wholly fabricated figure. The role played by journalism in the making of celebrities and celebrity culture is a recurring theme in this issue.

In the second paper, David Amigoni considers some of the debates surrounding the transformations in literary culture during the 1830s and 1840s, and in particular the phenomenon of 'lionising' and the celebrity culture of the author. Drawing on recent theoretical work in the field of auto/biography, Amigoni examines the life writings of Harriet Martineau (*Autobiography*, written 1850, published 1877) and Thomas Carlyle (*Reminiscences*, written 1832-1867, published 1881), and the ways in which both writers represented the complex and contested lionisation of Wordsworth. Through an examination of issues raised by these texts, Amigoni reflects upon the overlapping discourses of authorship, fame, gender and domesticity which these writers employed as self-justification for their public lives.

In her essay 'Meteor Wreaths', Valerie Sanders also examines the problems of fame and gender in a discussion which revisits Martineau in relation to Letitia Landon, and debates the very different coping strategies which these two writers adopted when suddenly thrust into the limelight. Part of Landon's infamy stems from her seeming compliance with the commercialism of the age and its exploitation of the helpless single woman. In contrast, and as Sanders argues, Martineau can be said to have handled the issue of her own public marketing more successfully. One of the things which links the writers in Sanders's article is their suffering at the hands of the (largely male) nineteenth-century literary establishment, and in particular their relations with William Maginn of *Fraser's Magazine* and his school of scurrilous journalism. Sanders places issues of women's literary careers to the fore here, concluding that what happened to Martineau and Landon reveals something of the problems women of the 1830s and 1840s always faced in entering a literary marketplace dominated by men who were invariably unnerved by successful women.

The contentious issue of women and fame is further developed by Alexis Easley and Pam Hirsch who focus on two of the most mythologised of Victorian women writers: Christina Rossetti and George Eliot. In 'Gender and the Politics of Literary Fame', Alexis Easley examines the way in which Christina Rossetti was involved in editing the short-lived Pre-Raphaelite magazine, *The Germ*, in 1850, and how she contributed to its artistic goals. Easley highlights the conflict between Rossetti's desire for authorial fame and her great fear of self-display, a conflict which can be seen to dictate to a degree her poetic contributions to *The Germ.* However, Easley also highlights the controlling role played by Rossetti's watchful brothers, Dante Gabriel and William Michael Rossetti, who worked to define and delimit the presence of their sister in the magazine. By attempting to depict Christina as a passive, reticent partner in their literary endeavours, they replicated complementary stereotypes of the unassuming 'female author' and the tortured 'feminine genius'. As Easley notes, it was Dante Gabriel who even selected the pseudonym 'Ellen Alleyn' for Christina to use.

The fact that Christina Rossetti was only partly able to resist these constructions of her literary identity in her writings, suggests a great deal about the kinds of boundaries that the mid-Victorian woman writer had to negotiate. These boundaries are also explored by Pam Hirsch in her essay 'Ligginitis, Three Georges, Perie-zadeh and Spitting Critics, or "Will the Real Mr Eliot Please Stand Up?" ', which examines the furore surrounding the identity of the author of *Adam Bede* in 1859. As Hirsh notes, it was generally assumed that the name attached to this runaway success, 'George Eliot', was a pseudonym as no-one in literary London had heard of such a writer. Amongst the suggestions put forward for the 'real' George Eliot was Joseph Liggins, a hustler and 'ne'r-do-well'. Hirsch examines the ramifications of the Liggins affair on Marian Evans's personal and private life, and in particular the way in which what was seen a cheap publicity stunt caused her to be 'outed'. As Martineau and Landon had discovered twenty years earlier, stepping into the public sphere was a move fraught with danger for a woman writer.

As two of the 'victims' of the public hunger for gossip observed by *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* in 1860, Charles Dickens and Edward Bulwer Lytton are rich sources for any investigation of nineteenth-century celebrity culture. Dickens's mastery of his own publicity machine, especially as it related to the breakdown of his marriage, has been a focus of discussion in numerous biographical studies, and in Tim Marshall's paper here, 'Not Forgotten', Dickens is discussed in his capacity as controller of his own journal, *All the Year Round*. Marshall explores Dickens's championing of an earlier 'icon', Eliza Fenning, who was the victim of a spectacular miscarriage of justice in 1815. The attraction of Fenning for Dickens owed much to the Victorian writer's well-developed sense of sentimentality but it was also indebted to his interest in the ongoing debates about the acceptability of executions as public spectacle. Marshall also argues, however, that the resuscitation of Fenning as victim of the prejudices of class and gender began much earlier with Mary Shelley's famous text, *Frankenstein*. As Marshall suggests, in Justine Moritz's trial and subsequent execution, Eliza Fenning looms large as a potential and neglected source of inspiration for the young Mary Shelley.

As a friend and advisor of Dickens (most notably on the amended ending of *Great Expectations*), Edward Bulwer Lytton and his own novels *Pelham* (1828), *Paul Clifford* (1830), *Eugene Aram* (1832) and *The Last Days of Pompei* (1834) have long been assigned to the critical scaffold. In turn, however, his very public attempts to rid himself of his inconvenient wife, Rosina Wheeler, are widely cited as examples of Victorian patriarchy at its most corrupt. Their stormy separation in 1836 (after Bulwer's increasing unfaithfulness) left Rosina embittered and she subsequently turned to near-libellous publication, producing a series of energetic novels and pamphlets in which she caricatured and mocked her husband. Bulwer retaliated by intimidating her publishers, denying her access to her children and finally, in 1858, by having her forcibly committed to an asylum from which she was only released after a public outcry. Long mocked both as writer and husband, Bulwer Lytton, the subject of a major conference at London University's Centre for English Studies in June 2000, now seems to be hovering on the verge of a comeback. In her essay 'Fame, Notoriety and Madness: Edward Bulwer-Lytton Paying the Price of Greatness', Marie Mulvey Roberts embarks on a long overdue re-assessment of this much-pilloried writer's work. As well as uncovering a wealth of new information about 'Sir Liar' and his considerable achievement as a novelist, she also draws attention to a writer whose work has been neglected by critics precisely because his notoriety has proved overpowering.

Issues around fame, infamy and notoriety pre-occupied many nineteenth-century writers and commentators, and were often intricately linked with issues of gender, class, audience and the literary marketplace. As the range of essays in this special issue of *Critical Survey* clearly demonstrate, this is a rich area of study and has much to tell us about the various ways in which the Victorians constructed, honoured and vilified their public figures.

Notes

1. 'The Editors Table', Harper's *New Monthly Magazine* 21 (October 1860): 700
2. *Ibid*.