ASPECTS OF CELEBRITY IN THREE RECENT BRITISH OPERAS

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ABSTRACT

This thesis seeks to establish an academic framework for the analysis of the role of celebrity in three recent British operas: namely John Casken’s God’s Liar, Thomas Adès’s Powder Her Face and Mark-Anthony Turnage’s Anna Nicole. In doing this it draws heavily on recent theories of celebrity, particularly Chris Rojek’s taxonomy relating to different types of celebrity status including the evolution from confirmatory to transgressive. The latter is discussed in relationship to female sexuality in nineteenth-, twentieth- and twenty-first century cultural and sexual norms. The thesis also discusses the primary means for the dissemination of celebrity and the increasing role of mass and social media. The operas are discussed not only in relation to pertinent literature in the form of reviews, programme notes, articles, libretti and monographs but also in terms of substantial interviews with John Casken, Philip Hensher and Mark-Anthony Turnage. This provides first-hand insights into the creative intentions behind the operas discussed, and these are placed in the wider context of the discourses surrounding celebrity culture and its dissemination. The thesis concludes that the three operas examined here make a significant contribution to the portrayal of celebrity.
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Chapter 1
Introduction

In recent decades a sub-genre of opera has emerged that deals with real people who have led controversial lives. The growing number includes *Nixon in China* (1987) and *Doctor Atomic* (2005) by John Adams, *When She Died... Death of a Princess* (2002) by Jonathan Dove and Michael Daugherty’s *Jackie O* (1997). While the latter two feature the lives of Princess Diana and Jackie Onassiss, other such operas feature celebrities such as the Duchess of Argyll and Anna Nicole Smith. The fascination with fame and celebrity status has existed for a very long time - some sources suggest as far back as historical records exist.\(^1\) However, in the last few decades, interest in celebrity has come to dominate contemporary culture far more than ever before. Its dissemination through a variety of media, including reality television, cinema, popular music and the internet, has been rapid and pervasive. It is therefore perhaps unsurprising that celebrity culture is beginning to emerge as a subject matter for opera.

The aim of this research is to establish a discourse that allows opera to contribute to the discussion surrounding the academic study of celebrity culture, and to understand how the ideas of identification and emulation relate to the study of opera. The question of how and to what extent opera contributes to the dissemination of celebrity culture will be addressed, along with the extent to which the depiction of female characters is distinct from or parallel to that of earlier heroines.

There are a number of questions that arise from an exploration of celebrity culture within the context of the contemporary operas that will be examined here. Firstly the historical context; when did celebrity culture begin and who could be considered to be some of the first celebrities? And secondly, what is the nature of identity, identification and

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spectatorship in relation to celebrity? Admittedly, such questions do not arise only in relation to opera but are currently explored in many other areas of contemporary culture. Since opera includes the interaction between music, words and theatre, it is relevant and pertinent to explore some of these in relation to the academic study of other disciplines, for example, literary theory and cinema studies, both of which overlap with the study of opera.

In order to address these aims, three operas have been chosen as case studies: John Casken’s God’s Liar (1999-2000), Thomas Adè’s Powder Her Face (1995) and Anna Nicole (2010) by Mark-Anthony Turnage. Casken’s work combines an adaptation of Tolstoy’s nineteenth-century novella, Father Sergius with a contemporary tale written by the composer and his co-librettist Emma Warner that was intended to represent an equivalent twentieth-century scenario. The libretto charts the downfall of Father Sergius at the hands of a series of fallen women, and that of a twentieth-century academic, Stephen, whose demise occurs as a result of his involvement with the celebrity culture industry. The work therefore provides an opportunity to examine the discourse surrounding the themes associated with current research in the field of celebrity culture, including identity, as well as the possibility of establishing how contemporary opera might play a role in the dissemination of celebrity culture in the twenty first century. It also provides an opportunity to establish parallels and distinctions between this opera and the nineteenth-century operatic tradition. This opera will be considered first because the composer has deliberately engaged with the writing of a contemporary opera in relationship to a nineteenth-century source, and it provides the most direct comparison between contemporary opera and the nineteenth-century operatic tradition.

Thomas Adè’s Powder Her Face, with a libretto by Philip Hensher, is a portrait of the controversial Duchess of Argyll whose high-profile divorce case caused a scandal in 1963 due to the explicit sexual nature of the evidence given in court and the involvement of some high-ranking politicians. Although there is some debate about the origins of celebrity culture,
an exploration of the academic research carried out in this field indicates that it is not merely a late twentieth-/early twenty-first century phenomenon. Indeed there is evidence to suggest that it goes back at least as far as the eighteenth century and arguably well beyond, although the nature of celebrity and its prominence in society was in many ways different from the contemporary understanding of celebrity culture. Adès’s portrayal offers an opportunity to engage with celebrity discourse in relation to the role of the tabloid press in the proliferation of scandal and its dissemination into the public arena in the mid-twentieth century. As with Casken’s opera, it is also possible to establish parallels and distinctions with operatic tradition, in particular, in the depiction of ‘disapproved’ female protagonists in the leading role, particularly in relation to operas such as Alban Berg’s *Lulu* or Richard Strauss’s *Salome*.

*Anna Nicole* is the only opera of the three studied here to depict a heroine who is a contemporary celebrity in every sense, one whose desire to emulate Marilyn Monroe reflects the craving for the fifteen minutes of fame prophesied for everybody by Andy Warhol in 1968. As such it provides a rich source of possible discourse surrounding current academic research in the field of celebrity studies. As Antonio Pappano, director of the Royal Opera House, suggests when likening Anna Nicole to a ‘fallen woman’, it also presents an opportunity to examine the portrayal of female sexuality in contemporary opera and to establish parallels with and distinctions from the portrayal of certain heroines in nineteenth-century opera.

The methodology used in this study includes interviews with the composers and librettists of the selected operas. The purpose of these interviews was to gather statements of intent as well as insights into how the other professionals involved in the production of an opera enhance or subtly change what the audience eventually experiences. The interviews are

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of particular importance in view of the paucity of literature relating to these operas. In chapter two there is an exploration of the hypothesis that the history of celebrity goes back as far as the ancient Greeks. This includes an investigation of ‘celebrities’ ranging from Alexander the Great to Lord Byron. In addition, there is an exploration of contemporary celebrity studies and in particular the themes of identity and identification in relation to film and television and to the moral and social values of contemporary society. This includes an analysis and discussion of various definitions and ways of categorising celebrities. As there currently appears to be no academic writing in the field of celebrity studies that directly relates to opera itself, despite the wealth of material relating to opera singers, the theory from these areas of celebrity culture research will be used to inform the research carried out in this study.

The increasing academic interest in the field of Celebrity Studies is reflected in the launching of a new journal, *Celebrity Culture*, in March 2010. A number of articles published in it have relevance to this study including Simon Morgan’s *Historicising Celebrity* which addresses some of the issues surrounding the history of Celebrity Culture and contributes to the discussion of celebrity culture in chapter two. Ghislaine McDayter’s book, *Byromania and the Birth of Celebrity Culture* also contributes to the historical debate, claiming that Byron’s popularity marked the beginning of the modern celebrity culture industry. This forms part of the discussion of *Powder Her Face* in chapter four. Other articles published in the

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3 There are a large number of books and articles that discuss opera singers from the past, some of whom could be regarded as celebrities, ranging from the prima donnas of the nineteenth century all the way to the celebrity singers of the twentieth century. Perhaps one of the best examples is Susan Rutherford’s monograph, *The Prima Donna and Opera, 1815-1930* (Cambridge, New York and Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2006) that includes details of the life of opera singers outside their professional roles in the opera house and engages with social, cultural and political discourses. *The Arts of the Prima Donna in the Long Nineteenth Century*, edited by Rachel Cowgill and Hilary Poriss (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) is also a good example. This collection of essays includes biographical information concerning singers such as Jenny Lind and Giulia Grisi discussing them in terms of celebrity status. Other literature includes Stelios Galatopoulos’s biography of Maria Callas, *Maria Callas: Sacred Monster* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998) that is as much about her private identity as it is about her public career. In addition, there are numerous examples of biographies that address this aspect of opera singers as well as articles. In fact, the idea of the opera singer as celebrity is an extensive subject that is not possible to explore in detail here but could be the topic of a different thesis.


Celebrity Culture journal contribute to the gendered politics surrounding female celebrities, for example, ‘Female Celebrities and the Media: The Gendered Denigration of the ‘Ordinary’ Celebrity’ by Milly Williamson.6

There are a number of collections of essays that collate some of the research carried out in the discipline of Celebrity Studies over recent years, notably The Celebrity Culture Reader edited by P. David Marshall,7 Marshall is also a contributor to this extensive analysis of various aspects of the academic disciple of celebrity culture. It provides a selection of historical and contemporary essays that document the significant role that celebrities play in contemporary culture and the implications for society. Of particular relevance are a chapter by Leo Braudy putting the case for the celebrity status of Alexander the Great, three chapters concerning aspects of feminine identity, body image and beauty, which demonstrate the celebrity as the embodiment of success in contemporary society, and a chapter by Graeme Turner that discusses tabloids and their impact on the public sphere, which has particular relevance to the discussion about Powder Her Face in chapter four. Marshall is also the author of Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture,8 which includes a discussion about reception theory, the principles of which can be applied to the study of the discrepancies between intention and reception in the operas that are explored here. Another collection of essays, this time about stardom, Stardom and Celebrity: A Reader,9 edited by Sean Redmond and Su Holmes, discusses a range of theoretical approaches to the subject and informs part of the framework in chapter two.

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A number of further books about aspects of celebrity culture help establish which theories would also be relevant to opera. *Understanding Celebrity*\(^{10}\) by Graeme Turner offers an explanation of what celebrity culture is and how it is produced and consumed; this contributes to the theoretical framework for chapter two and the following chapters. *Star Gazing*\(^{11}\) by Jackie Stacey focuses on the theory of spectatorship and also includes a section about the theory of cinema identification. Although these theories are not intended to encompass opera, they provide a useful contribution to ideas of identification and emulation that provide the framework for the discussion in later chapters. *In the Limelight and Under the Microscope*, edited by Su Holmes and Diane Negra,\(^{12}\) also concentrates on the discourse surrounding female celebrities and demonstrates the importance of the cultural, political and theoretical implications of celebrity culture in contemporary society. Again, although none of what is covered in this book is intended to relate directly to opera, it is possible to apply elements of the discussion to the works explored in this study. Chris Rojek’s categorisation of celebrity status in his book entitled *Celebrity*\(^{13}\) also provides a useful contribution to the theoretical framework in chapter two.

In relation to the composers of the operas studied, there appears to be very little scholarly material written. Despite the fact that John Casken is an established British composer, Arnold Whittall’s ‘Elegies and affirmations: John Casken at 60’ remains the most comprehensive overview of his music, and it contains a short descriptive passage concerning *God’s Liar*.\(^{14}\)

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\(^{12}\) Su Holmes and Diane Negra, eds., *In the Limelight and Under the Microscope: Forms and Functions of Female Celebrity* (New York: Continuum, 2011).


As Christopher Fox points out, in his *Tempestuous Times: the recent music of Thomas Adès*, there is a ‘dearth of serious writing about our younger composers’.15 His article concentrates on four of Adès’s works, one being his second opera, *The Tempest*. More recently Dominic Wells’s ‘Plural Styles, Personal Style: The Music of Thomas Adès’,16 has commented on the influence of Adès’s eclectic taste in his music and how his characteristic gestures create musical relationships between his pieces. However, in both articles *Powder Her Face* is only mentioned in passing. Perhaps the most useful source is Tom Service’s *Thomas Adès: Full of Noises*,17 which is a transcript of conversations between Adès and the author about various aspects of his career as a performer, conductor and composer. Discussion of his music includes thoughts about the influences, both historical and cultural, that Adès draws on, and the book contains a few brief thoughts concerning *Powder Her Face*, which give some insight into how he viewed the Duchess of Argyll. Apart from online reviews, there is little else of note relating to this opera. However, there are certainly a number of examples of sensationalist literature pertaining to the Duchess of Argyll, intended for the mass market. One of the more serious examples of such mass-market literature is Charles Castle’s biography of the Duchess, entitled *The Duchess Who Dared* (1994), which is based on extensive interviews with her, and which reveals some interesting background information about the Duchess and her perspective on the very public events of her life.18

In common with the other contemporary operas that are explored as part of this thesis, there is very little academic work to draw on concerning Anna Nicole Smith, and none concerning the opera itself. However, an article in *The Feminist Review* by Jeffrey A.

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Brown, entitled ‘Class and Feminine Excess: The Strange Case of Anna Nicole Smith’, explores the interaction between the way in which the mass media industry depicts the female body and issues of class and images of beauty in American culture. Brown’s analysis suggests that Anna Nicole Smith’s outrageous behaviour, including that so publicly displayed on her reality-television show, was inappropriate in terms of her image as the ideal beauty, and was the reason she became the subject of considerable criticism towards the end of her life. This relates to the notion of identity in the discourse surrounding celebrity culture, not just in America, but in Britain as well.

The following chapters will explore the history of celebrity culture, the themes and theories associated with research in this area and their significance for the study of contemporary opera and place the chosen operas within the evolving discourse of celebrity studies. The audience reception will be placed in the context of reception theory and ideas of spectatorship, and discrepancies between intention and reception will be discussed. Chapters three, four and five are case studies of the chosen operas that will be discussed within the framework set out in chapter two.

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Chapter 2
Aspects of Celebrity

Celebrity provides a surface through which contemporary culture produces significance and depth of investment in particular identities, moments and personalities.²⁰

In this chapter, the nature of celebrity and its manifestation in opera will be explored, with a view to creating an academic framework that will inform part of the discourse in the following chapters. In order to establish this framework, it is essential to understand the current theories and themes that characterise the academic discipline of celebrity studies. These include the idea of identity and para-intimacy, as well as stardom, the role of the media industry and of the audience, as well as the social functions of celebrity. A brief exploration of the history of fame and the place of celebrity culture within it will also form part of the discussion in order to help explain and define the contemporary phenomenon. Its inclusion serves to demonstrate that human societies have always singled out certain individuals and given them a status that could be regarded as comparable to that held by modern celebrities. This suggests the possibility that there is an inherent need to do so, and to a large extent, this acts as the driving force behind the development of celebrity, rather than it being solely the result of the explosion of late twentieth-and twenty-first century multi-media outlets that support the construction and dissemination of contemporary celebrity culture. It is only after having considered all of this that it will be possible to suggest ways in which contemporary opera could contribute to the discourse surrounding celebrity culture, and how the academic study of celebrity culture informs the analysis of the chosen operas.

Celebrity culture is often regarded as a recent phenomenon, originating from the final decades of the twentieth century and becoming increasingly pervasive in recent years. Certainly this is the position taken by the librettist Philip Hensher,\(^{21}\) as the discussion in chapter four will demonstrate. However, a number of academics in the field maintain that it has a much longer lineage, and even suggest that characteristics of celebrity culture could be witnessed in ancient Greek and Roman society over two thousand years ago, citing heroes and heroines (both real and fictional), athletes, charioteers, philosophers, poets and even Greek herairai (courtesans)\(^{22}\) and criminals as early manifestations of what we now term celebrities.\(^{23}\)

Garland, for example, maintains that:

> The Greek and Roman world has bequeathed to us an exceedingly rich gallery of individuals who were celebrities in their own day and whose careers provide us with the means to undertake a detailed and in-depth investigation of a phenomenon that is by no means exclusive to modern times, even if the means of promotion available today outdo anything that the most avid celebrity-seeker in antiquity could have lustfully dreamed of.\(^{24}\)

To illustrate his point Garland cites two cases, the first of an arsonist called Herostratus ‘who set fire to the great temple of Artemis at Ephesus in Turkey in 348 BCE and confessed under torture that the reason was an insatiable appetite for celebrity’.\(^{25}\) The very fact we are aware that Herostratus was responsible for this act is an indication that he was sufficiently famous for his name to be recorded, albeit for an act that brought him notoriety rather than fame for

\(^{21}\) Philip Hensher, Interview with the author (14 March, 2014).
\(^{24}\) Robert Garland, ‘Celebrity Ancient and Modern’, 484.
\(^{25}\) Ibid., 485.
more glamorous reasons. Garland also cites another example from the letters of a 1st century lawyer, author and Roman Magistrate, Gaius Plinius Caecilius Secundus (c.61 AD – c. 112AD), better known as Pliny the Younger, who wrote ‘should I not take pleasure in the celebrity of my name?’26 (Pliny’s famous letters are now an important source of Roman social history giving him posthumously what he desired in life). In addition, Leo Brady claims fame is ‘a constant theme in the history of western society and there is no disenable break inaugurating modern celebrity.’27 He suggests there are examples of characteristics of celebrity in the literary tradition of the ancient world, most notably in the Odyssey and in the Iliad.28 For example, in the Iliad Achilles claims that he would chose ‘a brief life if he could have immortal glory rather than a long but undistinguished existence’.29 This seems to reflect an interior drive also present in modern celebrities, who desire celebrity status and to be recognised for talent or unique qualities whatever the cost. This can, as Garland points out, result in ‘downfall and ruin’.30 This is a consequence that is explored by John Casken in his opera God’s Liar (1999-2000) and discussed in chapter three.

Perhaps the most famous heroic leader cited by academics looking for celebrity characteristics in ancient cultures is Alexander the Great who, according to Leo Baudy, ‘deserves to be called the first famous person’.31 There are of course other good examples including Julius Caesar, Augustus and Cleopatra, however, a brief exploration of possible celebrity characteristics demonstrated by Alexander the Great clearly illustrates the points being made. Certainly Alexander’s reputation as one of the greatest military leaders of all time, and the standard against which other military leaders were judged, has survived to this

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30 Ibid.
day. He remained undefeated in battle and was thus able to create one of the largest empires in the ancient world stretching from Egypt in the west to Pakistan in the east. He also built great cities, many of which were named after him, including Alexandria on the Northern Coast of Egypt, which grew to be one of the most important cities in the Hellenistic world, second only to Rome, and the place from which the Ptolemaic rulers of Egypt governed. His many triumphs were recorded and disseminated to the Greek world by the historian, Callisthenes whom he employed to publicise his heroic deeds. Callisthenes could be viewed as fulfilling a similar role to that of the modern publicists in keeping the celebrities they represent in the public eye.

Visual representations of celebrities in contemporary culture are also an important means of confirming and perpetuating their status. Although very different from the photographs and television images of the twenty first century, there have been iconic representations made of famous individuals in western culture since Roman times. Alexander the Great was no exception and like many kings and rulers his likeness was portrayed on coins circulating during his reign and in paintings. He was also immortalised in a number of sculptures created by Lysippus, a sculptor who was famous for the lifelike portrayals of his subjects. Lysippus was the only sculptor Alexander would permit to portray his likeness. Although this desire to be immortalised could be viewed as an example of the self-promotion associated with celebrity status, it is very different from that which typifies modern celebrity, as will be explained more fully later in this chapter.

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34 The most noteworthy is the Hermes Azara (a bust on a tapering pedestal) exhibited in the Louvre in Paris. British Museum, ‘Marble Portrait of Alexander the Great’.
As is the case with many influential leaders, whether they are kings or politicians, Alexander ruled at a crucial turning point in history when socially acceptable standards of public and private behaviour were changing.\(^{36}\) He challenged the old assumptions about the way in which kings should rule, separating civil and military power and creating a degree of social cohesion for Greeks, Persians and Macedonians under the banner of Greek language and culture.\(^{37}\) It could be argued that this was achieved more easily because of the reputation and status he had acquired, and demonstrated qualities of leadership rather than aspects of celebrity. (Similarly, there are modern examples of leaders who have achieved reconciliation between disparate people but who arguably are not celebrities in the conventional contemporary sense. Nelson Mandela is a clear example). As both a king and a war hero Alexander fulfilled the criteria for the possible avenues through which modern celebrities can emerge.\(^{38}\) As Braudy points out, he was known to be single-minded in his desire to constantly do the ‘impossible, outsized and unprecedented’\(^{39}\) which was ‘arguably a prerequisite of celebrity.’\(^{40}\) However, it is not just the achievements of a famous individual that ensures celebrity status but also a public interest in the private person. This is significant if there is any justification for Garland’s position that there were characteristics of celebrity culture to be found so far back in history. History does in fact not only record Alexander’s heroic public persona but also some of the behaviour he exhibited in private, when he reputedly got drunk with his companions and even murdered a friend in anger. This led some authors to portray him as both god and demon.\(^{41}\) Tales of his life continued to be told into the Middle Ages, and beyond, gaining an almost mythic quality. In this century he has been the subject of a film

\(^{36}\) Leo Braudy, ‘The Longing of Alexander’, 47.
\(^{37}\) Ibid.
\(^{39}\) Leo Braudy, ‘The Longing of Alexander’, 47.
\(^{40}\) Ibid.
\(^{41}\) Ibid.
directed by Oliver Stone (2004). Its treatment of his sexuality caused some controversy even when placed in the context of the times in which he lived, and the fact that this aspect of his life was regarded as pertinent subject matter in the film perhaps suggests he lends himself towards this celebrity like treatment. The obvious interest in him as a person, not just a leader, does have echoes of celebrity characteristics, however, the balance between these two is weighted in favour of the heroic leader and not predominantly the private persona as it is with modern celebrities.

Garland’s inclusion of athletes as examples of ancient celebrities makes the point that although fame in the ancient world was usually achieved more gradually than it is today, when individuals can become celebrities almost overnight, a possible exception would have been the Greek Olympic athletes.\textsuperscript{42} Garland notes that ‘it was the practice to identify each Olympiad (or quadrennial celebration of the Olympic Games) by the name of the winner in the stade footrace.’\textsuperscript{43} The first athlete to win this honour was a baker called Coroebus of Elis who won the race in 776 BCE. His name would have been known all over Greece and, as Garland points out, it would have been a very effective way of someone to go from obscurity to fame almost overnight, in much the same way as celebrities can do today.\textsuperscript{44} The honour bestowed on these athletes and the fame that followed is an indication of the social value placed on their achievements. Not only did their success demonstrate that it was possible to become famous without the benefit of a privileged birth or conquests in battle, but it also acted as an incentive for others to train. Evidence of physical fitness, endurance and athletic ability were attributes all men in ancient Greek society aspired to as military service was compulsory and the physical training expected of them was similar to that undertaken by

\textsuperscript{42} Athletics remains one of the many routes to celebrity status in the twenty-first century.
\textsuperscript{43} Robert Garland, ‘Celebrity Ancient and Modern’, 486.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid.
athletes.\textsuperscript{45} Their achievements still had a scarcity value\textsuperscript{46} that is associated with fame in the ancient world but nonetheless would also have seemed achievable.

The evidence of the sudden rise to fame for these athletes and the likelihood of public admiration and emulation, together with the affirmation of the social values their achievements represented does seem to suggest some characteristics of celebrity could arguably be said to be present in the ancient world. However, as will be explored later in this chapter, the modern celebrity is different in a number of significant ways. As Boorstin attests ‘The hero was distinguished by his achievements; the celebrity by his image or trade-mark. The hero created himself; the celebrity is created by the media. The hero was a big man; the celebrity is a big name.’\textsuperscript{47} Thus the comparison of similarities here by commentators such as Garland, whether with heroes or athletes, risks divorcing the discussion from the cultural contextualisation required to fully appreciate the complexities of the social phenomenon that modern celebrity culture has become. Although Boorstin claims there was never a moment in history when ‘fame and greatness were exactly the same thing’,\textsuperscript{48} it seems the essential element of how celebrity status is achieved in the twenty-first century is missing, if indeed we accept that modern celebrity is a unique configuration of cultural and economic factors\textsuperscript{49} and relies heavily on the intervention of the media industry with its power to construct and perpetuate celebrity status. This has led to the possibility of an individual being able to achieve celebrity status without any obvious gift and talents that would usually set them apart from their peers.

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 486.
\textsuperscript{48} Daniel J. Boorstin, \textit{The Image}, 46.
\textsuperscript{49} Simon Morgan, ‘Historicising Celebrity’, 366.
Famous figures from the ancient world are well represented in opera. Portrayals of Alexander the Great include two opera seria works, Handel’s *Alessandro* (1726), and Giovanni Puccini’s *Alessandro nelle Indie* (1824), the latter being one of over seventy operatic works that use Pietro Metastasio’s libretto about Alexander the Great. Both these works are typical of the opera seria that portray kings and rulers in a way that reinforces the values of court life, imbuing them with values and morality befitting royalty. Although neither of these operas appears to concentrate on the heroic aspect of Alexander’s persona, nor do they portray him as a celebrity. Instead they explore the classical question opera seria typically addresses. ‘How will the noble hero solve a moral problem without compromising his rational ideals?’

The plot of Puccini’s work, for example, explores a love triangle involving Alexander, Queen Cleofide and King Poro of India. Examples of other operatic works depicting famous people in the ancient work include Philip Glass’s *Akhnaten* (1983) about the life and religious convictions of Pharaoh Akhenaten of Egypt. The libretto, written by Glass, draws on ancient texts and is sung in the original Egyptian, Hebrew and Akkadian languages. Although it is possible to argue that Glass’s opera depicts Akhenaten in a way that provides some insight into the power and influence that pharaohs had in ancient Egypt, like Handel and Puccini, he does not appear to endow his protagonist with celebrity status. It is not only real historical figures from antiquity that are represented in opera, but also others who appear in works of fiction. For example, King Priam, Paris, Helen and Achilles from Homer’s *Iliad* are portrayed in Michael Tippett’s opera, *King Priam* (1962). Tippett’s libretto also draws on plays by Euripides and Hyginus’s *Fabulae*.

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portrays any ideas about celebrity culture, but instead explores the conflict between choice and pre-ordained fate.

There are many other examples of famous individuals throughout history who also form part of the lineage of the history of fame. Many conform to what Boorstin describes as ‘the traditional heroic type,’ by which he means that they are men and women who have ‘shown greatness in some achievement’, 53 such as heroism (in war and peace), political leadership (as with other great kings and queens or political leaders), or intellectual accomplishment in, for example, the arts or sciences, rather than fame for more frivolous or superficial reasons. Figures such as Joan of Arc, Napoleon, Queen Elizabeth I, Lord Nelson, Mother Teresa and Charles Dickens are good examples. This lineage continues to the present-day, and more recent examples include Anne Frank, Nelson Mandela or even Barack Obama. There are also those who are famous because they were notorious, Hitler, Jack the Ripper and Myra Hindley being three examples. Many of these historical figures have been represented in opera from Stefano Landi’s (1587-1639) Sant’ Alessio (1613), which is credited with being the first opera to be written on an historical subject, to the present day with examples such as John Adam’s Nixon in China (1987), Philip Glass’s Einstein on the Beach (1975) and Mandela Trilogy (2010) composed by Allan Stephenson, Mike Campbell and Peter Louis van Dijk.

Although not supporting the idea that there is evidence of characteristics of celebrity culture from two thousand years ago, there are a number of academics who contest the notion that celebrities are solely a construct of recent decades and instead subscribe to the idea that the origins of modern celebrity date back to the Enlightenment. 54 For example, Inglis maintains that the ‘birth of modern celebrity occurred during the Enlightenment and was

consolidated in the Industrial revolution,'\(^{55}\) this view is supported by Braudy who suggests that fame became ‘democratised from the late seventeenth century due to the spread of print literature, the growth of civil society and the decline of the royal court as the primary arbiter of renown’.\(^{56}\) The Industrial Revolution brought with it social and economic changes that would facilitate the birth of modern celebrity culture. The new, wealthy industrialists’ desire to make their mark in a society still dominated by privileged aristocracy, encouraged them to find ways to promote themselves that, as Rojek points out, ‘provided the template for contemporary celebrity culture.’\(^{57}\) However, perhaps the most significant contribution to the development of celebrity was a massive expansion of the print industry, due in part to the use of steam technology to power the print machines.\(^{58}\) The result was a significant increase in the number of newspapers\(^{59}\) and popular books being published that in turn facilitated the dissemination of new ideas as well as less serious news items and gossip. This was coupled with new technological advances in photography, which made mass production of photographs possible and facilitated their inclusion in newspapers and magazines. The print media therefore had the means to play a crucial role in promoting individuals and sustaining their public profiles, thus providing one of the essential components of modern celebrity status. An increase in literacy levels following the provisions of the Britain’s 1870 Education Act and a greater percentage of the population with some disposable income due to employment opportunities offered by new industries in towns and cities, provided a market for a variety of newspapers, periodicals and other literature. In order to prevent readers from being alienated by the volume of material being produced, and thus distancing them from the

\(^{56}\) Leo Braudy, ‘The Longing of Alexander’, 47.  
\(^{59}\) The Daily Mail, for example, first published in 1896 catered for a public that wanted to read shorter, simpler articles and provided an ideal platform for the publication of news and gossip associated with celebrities.
writer, a branding of individual identity was introduced to promote a sense of intimacy, thus heralding the beginnings of modern celebrity identity. The pioneering work of investigative journalists such as the controversial editor William Stead, their sensationalist style of writing and willingness to break the rules for a good story changed the way in which famous individuals were presented. In addition, the growing audience with an appetite for early celebrity news, printed images and gossip played, according to Morgan, a ‘crucial role in the growth of the public sphere, the emergence of a consumer society and the global expansion of western culture.’ The print media therefore contributed significantly to the emergence and development of a recognisably modern celebrity culture in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and remains an important means of disseminating celebrity culture even today.

Lennartz maintains ‘examples of celebrity culture in the decades between 1750 and 1850, and beyond show the enormous extent to which the Romantic age was defined and sustained by the rise in superstars and their devoted followers’. Famous figures such as the poet Lord Byron (1788-1824) certainly appear to qualify as early celebrities both on account of the fame they attracted as a result of their achievements, and because of the intense public interest in their private persona, which in the case of Lord Byron bordered on mass hysteria. The extraordinary reaction to the publication of Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage (1812-1818) was unprecedented and the start of a phenomenon that has become known as Byromania. There have been a number of attempts by critics to explain this. Samuel Chew, for example,

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65 Ghislaine McDayter, Byromania and the Birth of Celebrity Culture, 2.
suggested that it was simply because it was the first travel poem of its type to be published.\textsuperscript{66}

Some critics at the time suggested that it was the ‘repeated self-portraiture woven into his poems that enabled him to leap from mere literary fame to modern celebrity.’\textsuperscript{67} However, it seems unlikely that either of these reasons really explains the level of obsessive interest and it is more likely to be, in part, as McGann suggests, that his refusal to separate his private and professional personas\textsuperscript{68} created a more credible object of adoration. Whatever the reason, Byron seems to have enjoyed a comparable level of public recognition and following usually associated with modern celebrities such as David Beckham and Peter Andre. There is much evidence to support this view. For instance, his publisher, John Murray, claimed to have sold 10,000 copies of \textit{The Corsair} in one day, an unprecedented level of sales at the time.\textsuperscript{69}

Additionally, contemporary accounts of his public appearances indicate that large numbers of admirers gathered whenever there was an opportunity to catch sight of him. Fan letters poured in from men and women all over the country and details of his private life and social activities, both good and scandalous, were talked and written about.\textsuperscript{70} Thus, the fame associated with Byron was related less to his literary achievements than to his identity as a celebrity. Furthermore, the scale of his fame was previously unknown. As William St. Claire states, ‘Byronism was evidence of a celebrity different in scale to any that had gone before.’\textsuperscript{71}

This degree of public visibility and the nature of the fame itself all points to the conclusion that Byron’s popularity marked the beginning of modern celebrity culture. It certainly seems to satisfy one of the main social functions of modern celebrity in that it generated para-social interactions with his fans. The role of the fan is now recognised in modern cultural studies as

\textsuperscript{66} Samuel Chew, \textit{Byron and England: His Fame and After Fame} (London: John Murray, 1924), 9, quoted in Ghislaine McDayter, \textit{Byromania and the Birth of Celebrity Culture}, 2.

\textsuperscript{67} Ghislaine McDayter, \textit{Byromania and the Birth of Celebrity Culture}, 2.

\textsuperscript{68} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{69} Tom Mole, ‘Lord Byron and the End of Fame’, 349.

\textsuperscript{70} Ghislaine McDayter, \textit{Byromania and the Birth of Celebrity Culture}, 2-3.

\textsuperscript{71} Ibid., 4.
a powerful and active element in cultural production.\footnote{Corin Throsby, ‘Byron, Commonplacing and Early Fan Culture’, in: Tom Mole, ed., \textit{Romanticism and Celebrity Culture, 1750-1850} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 227-244, at 227.} His indisputable status as a celebrity in his own time supports the hypothesis that it is not merely a contemporary phenomenon. This is a salient point if Hensher’s view of the Duchess of Argyll is to be disputed in the discussion of \textit{Powder Her Face} in chapter four.

Although Byron’s poetry has been the inspiration for operas such as Verdi’s \textit{Il Corsaro} (1848), the only opera that seems to portray him is Virgil Thomson’s \textit{Lord Byron} (1961-1968). Unlike other operas mentioned in this chapter that depict historical characters, Thomson does not deal with Byron’s achievements, instead he concentrates on the celebrity aspect of his fame and in particular his notoriety. The plot centres on the gathering of Byron’s family and friends at Westminster Abbey to present a statue of him to the Dean and argue their case for his being buried with other famous poets. This aspect of the plot deals with the value and cultural meaning of Byron’s identity. However, Thomson also portrays the notorious aspect of Byron’s celebrity with reference to his memoirs. These contained details of all the scandalous acts he had perpetrated during his lifetime, including an incestuous relationship with his half-sister. The disapproval shown by the other characters when they remember his antics reflects the transgressive and socially threatening nature of the scandals that surrounded his life.\footnote{Chris Rojek, \textit{Celebrity}, 173.} Reception of the opera at its premiere in 1972 suggests the audience found Byron’s character to be what Lipman describes as a ‘creature of pity rather than Byronic’,\footnote{Samuel Lipman, “‘Lord Byron’ Undone”, \textit{Grand Street}, 5 (1986), 180-193, at 188.} as could perhaps be expected of the portrayal of a charismatic celebrity. However, it is clear from one review that this partly reflected the singer’s interpretation of the role,\footnote{Samuel Lipman, “‘Lord Byron’ Undone”, 189.} rather than the expressed intention of the composer and librettist. Another contemporary opera that deals with the aftermath of the death a celebrity is Jonathan Dove’s
When She Died… (2002) which portrays the public reaction to the death of Diana, Princess of Wales.

In order to consider what defines modern celebrity culture and to assess the differences between its contemporary manifestations and any aspects of celebrity that may have appeared before the twentieth century it is important to establish a definition. Although two leading academics in the field, Holmes and Redmond suggest that it is difficult to be too prescriptive when defining the term celebrity due to the many connotations of celebrity status.\(^\text{76}\) It is nonetheless important in this context to identify a working hypothesis to be used as a starting point when considering the three chosen operas. Boorstin states that, ‘the word ‘celebrity’ derives from two Latin words, celebritas, meaning multitude or fame, and celeber meaning populous or famous and referred not to an individual but to a condition.’\(^\text{77}\) He goes on to elaborate that in the simplest sense a celebrity is an individual who is ‘well known for their well-knownness’\(^\text{78}\) and this is a definition that can be applied to all the celebrities portrayed in the chosen operas as well as those in other contemporary operas referred to in this chapter. It is also a statement that could arguably be applied to individuals from any century, regardless of the origin of their celebrity status. However, it is a very simplistic overview and a more detailed definition is required here in order to support the analysis of the chosen operas.

The analysis of modern celebrity culture centres around three important components, the individual, the audience and the media industry. It is the criteria used to define the individual that is the subject of debate. For example, Turner points out, ‘there have been a number of attempts at defining celebrities through a set of qualities they exhibit and this results in a system that defines them according to the power they possess through inheritance

\(^{77}\) Daniel J. Boorstin, The Image, 57.
\(^{78}\) Ibid.
or political and social determinants responsible for their public profiles, the meaning they generate,79 or the personal qualities and a driving desire they appear to have to set them apart from the rest of society and make them unique. This is, at least in part, the way in which Garland at al. seem to have analysed celebrity in the Ancient World and, as a result, reached their conclusion that there is evidence of celebrity characteristic in historical figures such as Alexander the Great. However, Rojek’s categorisations appear to be the most relevant in framing the aspects of celebrity in the contemporary operas examined as part of this study, although it is possible that analysis of other works would require the categories to be refined or expanded.

Rojek presents three broad categories that relate to how celebrity status is conferred: Ascribed, Achieved and Attributed. The category of Ascribed Celebrity is used to describe individuals who have achieved celebrity status as result of their blood line and includes members of the royal family.80 The celebrity status of Prince William, Prince Harry and Caroline Kennedy, for example, originates from their line of biological descent. This preordained position in society was also enjoyed by kings and queens in the past who would have commanded automatic respect and veneration.81 Thus, this category of celebrity has a clear linage linking modern celebrity culture with the history of fame, although, as Rojek points out, ‘Individuals may add to or subtract from their ascribed status by their voluntary actions, the foundation of their ascribed celebrity is predetermined.’82

The conventional role of royalty has been concerned with constructing and maintaining ideas of national identity and upholding traditional values, but modern monarchies have had to make significant changes to the image they present and to the

82 Ibid.
relationships they have with social structures such as class.\textsuperscript{83} Evidence of these changes include Prince William’s decision to go to a university outside Oxbridge and to be, as far as possible, a ‘normal’ student, and his marriage to Catherine Middleton, whose ‘ordinary’ background is different from that of the traditional royal bride.\textsuperscript{84}

There is a long history of the public clamouring for authentic details of the lives of public figures\textsuperscript{85} that has gathered momentum in recent decades. As a result, members of the royal family, as Holmes and Redmond point out, ‘like other celebrities …have become increasingly enfolded into discursive frames that involve an illusion of intimacy.’\textsuperscript{86} Revelations about their private lives that make them appear ‘ordinary’ and therefore, as Beer states, ‘closer to, while little better version of, the rest of the population’\textsuperscript{87} has both increased the popularity of individual members of the royal family, and that of the monarchy as an institution. Clear evidence for this can be found by examining the public image of Princes William and Harry and that of their mother, Diana, Princess of Wales, who was perhaps the most famous royal celebrity of the twentieth century. Prince William and Prince Harry have spent their whole lives living in the spotlight of constant media attention, their every action (especially as adults) dissected and discussed. The intense media interest in the wedding of Prince William and Kate Middleton is a good example of their celebrity value and the way in which it creates and facilitated a para-intimacy event in which members of the public invested part of their identity and saw themselves as being part of the broader ritual.\textsuperscript{88}

Diana’s celebrity identity was extensively represented in the media throughout the world and


\textsuperscript{84} Andreas Widholm and Karin Becker, ‘Celebrating with the Celebrities’, 9.


\textsuperscript{86} Su Holmes and Sean Redmond, eds., \textit{Framing Celebrity: New Directions in Celebrity Culture} (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), quoted in Andreas Widholm and Karin Becker, ‘Celebrating with the Celebrities’, 10.


\textsuperscript{88} Andreas Widholm and Karin Becker, ‘Celebrating with the Celebrities’, 13.
was an important aspect of her relationship with the public.\(^89\) Part of that identity resulted from her membership of the royal family, the rest was self-subscribed as a ‘Queen of Hearts’ and ‘ambassador for this country’, and posthumously as ‘the people’s princess’.\(^90\) Her ability to engage with ordinary people, promote and support charities, and other good causes, as well as exposing her private life (family relations, sexual relationships, her eating disorder etc.) to public scrutiny, created a very modern celebrity identity that engaged with a number of social issues in contemporary society.

The category of Ascribed Celebrity is well represented in twentieth-century opera. For example, Jonathan Dove’s opera *When She Died… Death of a Princess* (2002) explores the unprecedented mass outpouring of grief following the death of Diana, Princess of Wales. The librettist, David Harsent, created characters that related to Diana in different ways so that they both represent various aspects of the identification associated with fandom as well as various social groups within contemporary society. Doris and Dennis are an ordinary couple trying to make their way to London for the funeral in order be a part of the broader ritual, Annie is full of grief for the loss of her own child which has been reawakened by Diana’s death and Ryan has Clerambault’s syndrome (a condition that causes him to believe an inaccessible celebrity (Diana) is in love with him). A Homeless Man, symbolically standing outside the action as the homeless are separated from the rest of society, observes and comments on the events.\(^91\) The use of ‘ordinary language’ in the libretto adds authenticity to the contemporary setting of the opera, although it sometimes lacks poetic depth as a result. The fact that this opera was written for television, rather than the stage, adds an additional connection to the celebrity

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culture it represents. It also disseminates Dove’s contribution to the discourses surrounding opera and celebrity via the same media that disseminated the celebrity identity of Diana, Princess of Wales. As Dove states, ‘It occurred to me that the death of Princess Diana was a perfect subject for a television opera, since her life had been lived so much in the media gaze, and the public knew her especially through television.’\(^92\) Although the first showing of the opera on Channel 4 reportedly attracted one million viewers, it also proved to be controversial. The episode in which Ryan pays a prostitute to dress as Diana appears to have caused some negative comment with the one tabloid newspaper referring to it as ‘Sick opera to mark five years since Diana's death.’\(^93\) There is considerable debate about the merit of creating opera for television; some commentators agree with Dove and ‘embrace it as a means of expanding the interpretation of opera’,\(^94\) making it relevant to the contemporary subjects it deals with. However, there are those, possibly with some underlying elitism, who, like Joe suggest that ‘it strips the audience of its imagination’\(^95\) and devalues its cultural status.

The second category of celebrity, Achieved Celebrity, refers to those individuals, most often from the sports and entertainment industries, but also from other areas such as academe, whose achievements are recognised as having exceptional skill or talent in the public realm. Stephen Hawking, David Beckham, Darcey Bussell, Pavarotti and the Beatles are all good examples. Stardom is also arguably part of this category and is discussed in more detail below. Not all individuals who achieve recognition in these areas have celebrity status; this is only achieved when their identity is promoted and maintained by the media industry.

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\(^95\) Jeongwon Joe, ‘Television Opera, 708.
This is also a category of celebrity represented in opera as will be discussed in relation to John Casken’s opera *God’s Liar* in chapter three.

The final category of celebrity proposed by Rojek is Attained Celebrity, attributed to any individual who achieves celebrity status without the benefit of any specific talent. They are ‘ordinary’ people who have been awarded their celebrity status by the media (they are television personalities). Television is a medium through which celebrity culture achieves its validation and affirms, as Langer states, ‘the shared significance of an individual’s transition to celebrity’ status. Reality television is one way in which this can be achieved, and is one of the reasons why the details of Anna Nicole Smith’s life continued to be in the public domain for so long. A television celebrity is, according to Alberoni, ‘configured round conceptions of familiarity’ and as such enjoys ‘mass acceptability’. This is due largely to the domestic setting in which the lives of the celebrities are played; having ‘invited’ them into the home we find that their status and significance becomes more personal. This intimacy tends to produce personalities rather than stars like those in Hollywood and arguably makes it easier to become famous for being famous rather than for any specific talent. This is evidenced through the intense interest in television shows such as *Big Brother*. Even when a reality show centers on a celebrity who has made his or her name in the music industry, for example, attention is primarily focused on the minutiae of their day-to-day lives reinforcing them as a figure that is both significant and familiar. One such example is *Peter Andre: My Life*, which documented intimate and personal episodes in the life of the singer, including the death of his brother, Andrew. Reality television is also a big business in America, featuring celebrities such as the Osbournes (2000-2005) and Anna

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Nicole Smith, who had her own show between 2002 and 2004, as well as providing a forum for would-be celebrities in shows such as the *Real Wives of Atlanta* (2012). These programmes not only deal with trivia and treat it as though it was of greater significance, but also have a tendency to objectify women in a way that allows their significance to be centered on their appearance. This was particularly true in the case of Anna Nicole Smith whose whole career was focused on body image. As Williamson points out, ‘the widespread scorn and derision directed at celebrities is aimed predominantly at a particular kind of female celebrity who is an ordinary girl whose fame is a result of appearances on reality TV programmes.’\(^{100}\) Williams goes on to suggest that ‘The gendered politics of the treatment of female celebrities highlights a return to open class prejudice that has resurfaced in recent years in Anglo-American culture.’\(^{101}\) This argument has particular relevance to the celebrity of Anna Nicole Smith, the central character in Mark Anthony Turnage’s opera, *Anna Nicole*, and will be discussed further in chapter five.

The term star is often used interchangeably with celebrity. People talk of football stars or television stars, for example. However, stardom and the idea of a star initially emerged from the film and cinema industry, and was originally used to describe a famous actor whose public image was focused on a fascination with their private life that had eclipsed any interest in the films they played in, or the characters they portrayed. As Geraghty comments, ‘the concept of stardom is sustained by a contrast between the performing presence and what happens ‘off-stage’.’\(^{102}\) Today the identity of a film star is a complex interaction between their identity as a real person and the identity of the characters they play and thus their ‘images are always extensive and intertextual.’\(^{103}\)


\(^{101}\) Milly Williamson, ‘Female Celebrities and the Media’, 118.


Although Rojek does not specifically refer to stars and stardom in his second category of achieved celebrity, it seems that, with some degree of latitude in the definition to allow for a longer history and a more complex identity, film stars do belong with other celebrities who have acquired their status as a result of exceptional achievement. King, supports this view, suggesting that ‘a star could be usefully defined as a heroic performer, one who within a context of leisure and entertainment renders an exceptional performance.’ However, an outstanding performance can be more difficult to define in the arts (acting, music or dance) than in sport, for example, where there is an objective standard. This is especially the case if, as King attests, the ‘performance is central to the production of meaning.’ Nevertheless, there are roles in acting and singing that are universally accepted as requiring great skill, Shakespeare’s Hamlet or Richard Strauss’s Elektra, for instance. In both film and opera the actor/singer’s identity with a character is vital if the performance is to be extraordinary. This is arguably more difficult for an opera singer who needs to be a talented actor as well as a gifted singer.

As stars of the film industry can become well known and for a role that first gave them public recognition, opera singers can become well known for the roles they perform. Although signing a ‘big name’ in the operatic world may not have quite the level of revenue implications as it does in the film industry, it nonetheless can draw in audiences and encourage them to watch operas in which they may not otherwise be interested. There have been a number of opera singers in recent times who could perhaps be regarded as stars, including Luciano Pavarotti (1935-2007), Joan Sutherland (1926-2010), Cecilia Bartoli (1926-2010), Maria Callas (1926-1977). It seems reasonable to view these stars of the opera stage in the same light as some of the Hollywood acting stars who have become famous.


\[106\] Maria Callas is an example of an opera singer who was also a celebrity. The details of her private life were almost as interesting to her fans as her ability as a singer. Thus, details of her unresolved conflict with her
for their accomplishments such as Meryl Streep or Johnny Depp for example. In some instances roles are written with a specific star in mind. Peter Pears for instance is closely associated with many of Britten’s operatic characters, Peter Grimes being one of the most famous. Conversations with composers suggest that the question of who will sing the main operatic role at the first performance can often be an influential factor when writing the music for contemporary opera. Consideration is given to which particular singer has a voice with the qualities that will enhance the characterisation and sometimes, as with the portrayal of Anna Nicole, whether the singer is comfortable playing more controversial scenes.  

In film studies the concept of cinematic identification has parallels with literary theory and character identification. For the audience, this can mean following and watching the action from the character’s point of view, but it also suggests a connection with them through what Stacey describes as ‘shared knowledge, shared moral and social values, or a sympathy with their situation’.  

It is also the opportunity for vicarious experiences that facilitate identification with alternative identities and social situations, thus encouraging an emotional connection that promotes a fuller engagement with the plot of the film/opera. This is an important consideration when commissioning new work in the film (and television) world and one of the ways in which to attract and keep audiences. It is also possible to argue that this interpretation of identification theory could also be applied to opera. The place of the text has parallels with the screen play of film and television. The interpretation and portrayal of characters in opera who also embody and articulate various human conditions, social issues and shared values arguably encourages empathy from the audience in the same way

mother, her troubled marriage and the desperation she felt when her relationship with Aristotle Onassis (1906 – 1975) ended when he married Jackie Kennedy all became the subject of gossip. See Arianna Huffington, Maria Callas: The Woman Behind the Legend (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981), 10. Maria Callas also appears as a character in Michael Daugherty’s opera Jackie O.

107 Mark-Anthony Turner, Interview with the author (12 February 2014).
108 Jackie Stacey, Star Gazing, 130.
109 Ibid.
protagonists do in films. Identification with a character in opera can also act as an inspiration for other librettists and composers. For example, Hensher’s expressed sympathy for the predicament of the fictional Lulu in Berg’s eponymous opera was the inspiration for both his debut novel, Other Lulus,110 and the libretto for Powder Her Face.111

Having looked at the professional identity of a star and how the theory of identification could be applied to opera, it is now important to consider the personal identity of a star. In other words their celebrity status. This is an important area of research in the context of this study, providing part of the framework for both God’s Liar and Powder Her Face. The celebrity aspect of a star relies (as it does for celebrities in other contexts) on the fame generated by the intense interest in details of their private lives that has created an identity that is separate from their professional one. Stars, in common with sporting celebrities, have a dual identity. Initially they come to the attention of the public because their achievements set them apart from their peers, but the point at which they can really be considered as celebrities is when details of their private lives also become the focus of public interest. Indeed, this fascination with all aspects of their private lives is positively encouraged by the media industry, no matter how intrusive, and serves to keep the celebrity in the limelight. For the audience it is the ultimate pleasure as it deals with the most intimate details, the ‘real’ behind the celebrity construct. Details of the private lives of stars are gained from newspapers, magazines, the internet, social media, interviews, images etc. creating what Geraghty describes as ‘an intertextuality that informs a range of discourses in which a star is involved.’112 In addition, high-profile events such as The National Film Awards or The Oscars increase the level of exposure and assist in the process of familiarisation. However, success or failure in the professional sphere does not correlate with success or failure as a

111 Philip Hensher, Interview with the author.
celebrity. In this context, if the professional role of an individual is diminished celebrity status can still continue, as it is the circulation of information and images that promote and maintain the celebrity’s status and encourage para-relationships between celebrities and the audience.

Another aspect to stardom that requires consideration in relation to some of the characters in operas examined in this study is the fact that the high visibility of stars not only promotes para-intimacy, but also encourages the formation of new identities in audience members who aspire to be like the stars they admire. The result is an interaction between existing and desired identities. Stacey suggests that this demonstrates the process of identity transformation through spectatorship, and that this is one explanation for the popularity of the film stars. They have become a symbol of nobility and heroism in contemporary society and the focus of adoration, to the point where, in some instances, this fascination can be expressed through what Stacey describes as the ‘discourse of religious worship in which stars are treated more like gods and goddesses.’ Although, as Rojek claims, ‘celebrity worship is regularly condemned in public as idolatry, carrying connotations of slavery and false consciousness, triviality and superficiality,’ the desire to emulate celebrities is still strong. This may be because the general identity of a star is seen as being representative of Western values, and, in the United States, the American Dream. However, there is also an underlying theme of temptation and risk that can sour the image. This presents a conflict of perception between the image of the star as spectacular and extraordinary, and the actor behind the image whose daily life can be ordinary and uninspiring. The gulf between the image of stardom and the reality can be the cause of deep unhappiness for some stars, most

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113 Jackie Stacey, Star Gazing, 172.
115 Chris Rojek, Celebrity, 51.
famously in the case of Marilyn Monroe, who achieved her ambition but was miserable and, as a result, created a tragic/pathetic aspect to her image.\(^{117}\) Despite this she was an inspiration to ‘want-to-be’ celebrities, including Anna Nicole Smith. She is also the inspiration for the characterisation of the star in *God’s Liar*.

Most academics and other commentators seem to concentrate their research on the analysis of the more glamorous side of celebrity, which reflects and promotes dominant social values.\(^{118}\) Rojek, however, acknowledged there is another side to celebrity, the ‘notorious, transgressive, or criminal.’\(^{119}\) This occurs when individuals transgress society’s dominant moral, ethical and social standards. The moral perspective is, of course, different in different societies and in different centuries. In the nineteenth century for example, the fallen woman was the archetypal transgressive whose sexual exploits were liable to result in condemnation and exclusion from middle-class society. This is not the case in the twenty-first century where sex outside marriage is not only widespread but usually acceptable, The exception being, as Lull and Hinerman point out, when individuals belong to institutions that publically hold them to higher moral standards usually because of the damage it would do to their public/professional reputation. For example, Prince Charles’s affair with Camilla Parker-Bowles ‘scandalised both the monarchy\(^{120}\) and the general public. This situation was exacerbated as a result of further revelations exposed when Diana, Princess of Wales was interviewed by Martin Bashir in the BBC’s current affairs programme Panorama in November 1995. However, discourses relating to contemporary sexual transgressions and subsequent scandal tend now to centre on reports of historical and contemporary sexual abuse of children by celebrities, or members of the Christian church. Other examples of

\(^{118}\) Graeme Turner, *Understanding Celebrity*, 22.
\(^{119}\) Ibid.
transgressive behaviour include the results of addiction and substance abuse, such as
domestic violence and theft. Transgression and scandal as a result of sexual exploits or
addiction are explored in the chosen operas and therefore from part of the framework that
supports the discussion of them. There are, of course many other examples of transgressive
behaviour, indeed too many to list here, and contemporary opera has engaged with many of
them. For example, hijacking and murder are explored in *The Death of Klinghoffer*, John
Adams’s opera based on the hijacking of the passenger liner Achille Lauro by the Palestine
Liberation Front in 1985, and the hijackers' murder of wheelchair-bound 69-year-old Jewish-
American passenger, Leon Klinghoffer. 121

The public fascination with every aspect of the private lives of celebrities and the
desire to find what Bulck and Claessens describe as the ‘real person behind the celebrity
construct’ 122 is at the heart of the fascination with celebrity scandal and notoriety. Notoriety
can be acquired by various means, ranging from expenses scandals to murder, but the focus
here will be on scandal as a result of sexual transgressions as this relates to the discussion of
the chosen operas in the following chapters. Bulck and Claessens go on to make the point that
although ‘adultery can be discussed in terms of sociological, biological, psychological or
religious terms, it is only the “women’s fault” frame that supports the sexual double standard,
claiming women are responsible for a man’s adultery.’ 123 This will therefore form part of the
framework used in chapter three in the discussion of the nineteenth-century element of
Casken’s opera.

In order for a transgression to turn into a scandal there has to be both a degree of
public knowledge about the events and a level of public disapproval. 124 Scandals can only be

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121 ‘John Adams’, Composer profile, Boosey and Hawkes Online (accessed 23 November 2014),
122 Hilde Van Bulck and Nathalie Claessens, ‘Guess who Tiger is having Sex with now? Celebrity Sex and the
123 Hilde Van Den Bulck and Nathalie Claessens, ‘Guess who Tiger is having Sex with now?’, 46.
such once they have entered the public domain through the media, frequently the tabloid papers, whose journalistic style and methods are ideally suited to the sensationalist reporting associated with scandal, and whose wide readership provides a guaranteed interested and attentive audience. The newspaper editor and investigative journalist, William Thomas Stead’s reporting of the 1885 Crawford v. Crawford and Dilke divorce case became a scandal due to the explicit sexual details it revealed and the involvement of well-known politicians, indeed, it brought fame and notoriety to the participants. According to Marshall, the whole tabloid newspaper sector in Britain is now influenced by Stead’s pioneering style of journalism that fails to demonstrate any restraint or consideration for the effect revelations might have on the individuals concerned, even stooping to the practice of offering a reward to readers who could provide ‘their personal account of adulterous sex with a reasonably well known personality.’

By the 1960s the reporting of scandal was common place and the lives of politicians and film-stars such as Elizabeth Taylor, who received a good deal of media attention due to public interest in her as both an actress and for her many marriages, and high-profile aristocrats such as the Duchess of Argyll whose divorce in 1963 was the subject of considerable media attention. (Her celebrity status achieved as a result of notoriety is explored as part of the discussion of Powder Her Face in chapter four.) Scandal has continued to remain a dominant feature of tabloid journalism today, both in Britain and around the world although it also features significantly in other media outlets such as television and the internet. As Turner points out, scandal, and the gossip that results, function

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as ‘an important social process through which relationships, identity and social and cultural norms are debated, evaluated, modified and shared.’

Thus the adulterous relationships of figures such as the Duchess of Argyll, Prince Charles and numerous contemporary celebrities ‘facilitates the articulation of moral, ethical and social views on sexual issues in modern society.’ Although scandal primarily functions as an affirmation of the dominant ideologies and codes of morality, it can also act as a catalyst for social change, by raising awareness of issues that may otherwise not have entered the public domain. Contemporary examples include the scandal surrounding the church in relation to child abuse and the revelations about sexual abuse committed by well-known figures such as Jimmy Saville and Rolf Harris. The tabloid press and other media outlets play a significant role in the exposure of such transgressions and in holding those responsible to account, whilst transforming a story into an effective narrative that will appeal to a wide audience.

Although the discussion above clearly demonstrates the very public nature of scandal and notoriety and its ability to create a public identity for its participants, it is fundamentally different from the pro-social celebrity identity. However, as Turner points out, Rojek, whilst accepting that celebrity identity generally supports the dominant norms of society, believes the impact made by figures such as the Duchess of Argyll and their ability to generate fans and followers, as well as their impact on the ‘public consciousness’, justifies their status as celebrities.

The role of the media industry in the creation of a celebrity is significant and has implications for all the chosen operas as well as for the proliferation and dissemination of celebrity culture. It is responsible for both sides of the celebrity coin, the glamorous and the notorious. The rise of this vast and ever expanding industry includes print media and

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129 Hilde Van Den Bulck and Nathalie Claessens, ‘Guess who Tiger is having Sex with now?’, 46.
130 James Lull and Stephen Hinerman, eds., *Media Scandals*, passim.
television and film industries, already mentioned in this chapter, but also the internet with its massive global reach. All play their part in constructing and disseminating celebrity culture as the discussion in this chapter demonstrates. Dissemination also occurs on a smaller scale through theatres and, more recently with opera houses commissioning works such as *Anna Nicole*.

As the discussion above concerning the intense and ongoing media interest in celebrities demonstrates, the audience is also a significant and important component in the proliferation of celebrity culture and the validation of a celebrity. The audience members are the representatives of society and are often socially and geographically diverse, coming from all sections of the social spectrum and often from all over the world. The investment of part of their own identity in the identity of celebrities is a significant factor in the validation of this cultural phenomenon. The audience for classical opera has perhaps been traditionally less socially diverse than for other forms of entertainment but this, as the discussion about the audience for *Anna Nicole* in Chapter five will demonstrate, is increasingly not the case.

If we accept that mankind has always had a desire to achieve great deeds and there have always been those who have worshiped, identified with and emulated those that who have achieved such deeds or been born to positions of greatness, then it is reasonable to suppose that those aspects of celebrity culture could have been found in ancient societies. Indeed the need to seek fame and emulate those who exhibit qualities that set them apart appears to be inherent in the human psyche (a contentious suggestion, of course). However, the overwhelming evidence gained from the current research surrounding celebrity cultures studies suggest that it is a much more recent phenomenon. The beginnings of modern celebrity culture seem to have started with the explosion of the print industry at the end of the eighteenth century. Figures such as Lord Byron and Maria Callas clearly exhibited all the attributes of celebrity status as the intense interest in his private live indicates. There is also
clear evidence for a depth of investment in the identities of celebrity figures from that point that is less evident prior to the late eighteenth century. As Turner points out, it is the pervasiveness of celebrity culture that marks out the contemporary version.\textsuperscript{131}

The academic study of celebrity is complex and multifaceted, and it has therefore only been possible to explore a small part of it here. Drawing on the work of a number of leading academics in the field this chapter forms the basis of the discussion in the chapters that follow. The aspects of celebrity found in those operas enrich their textual and visual images and provide a complex contemporary narrative that reflects meaning and value in both the operas themselves and in modern society.

\textsuperscript{131} Graeme Turner, \textit{Understanding Celebrity}, 15.
Chapter 3

Pride, Temptation and Celebrity in God’s Liar

The contrast between the strongly-defined human presence (in *To fields we do not know*) and the focus on the stars and outer space (in *Orion over Farne*) establishes an elemental force field within which Casken has continued to explore essential matters of identity and belief.132

The framework established in the previous chapter will be used here to discuss aspects of celebrity that are portrayed in John Casken’s second opera, *God’s Liar* (1999-2000). As the quotation at the top of the page indicates, identity is a theme widely used in Casken’s music and is evident in this opera as well. Ideas of identity relating to stardom in the film industry, academe and its relationship with Achieved Celebrity status, and the role of the media industry will be used to frame the twentieth-century element of the opera. Since this work also portrays the nineteenth-century world created by Leo Tolstoy in his novella, *Father Sergius* (1898),133 consideration will also be given to ideas of identity relating to the social, moral, political, religious and cultural aspects of that century and how they are represented in Casken’s work. Whether these two elements create plausible, equivalent scenarios, as intended by the composer and librettist, will also form part of the discussion. *God’s Liar* will also be explored in relation to the operatic tradition, taking particular note of the portrayal of ‘disgraced’ women protagonists. Finally, consideration will be given to the contribution this opera makes to the discourses surround contemporary celebrity culture.

*God’s Liar* was jointly commissioned by The Almeida Festival, London and Théâtre Royale de la Monnaie in Brussels. It was premièred in Brussels in July 2001, directed by Keith Warner, with the Almeida Ensemble conducted by Ronald Zollman. This production

133 Leo Tolstoy, *Father Sergius*, Translated by Louise and Aylmer Maude (Maryland: Tark, 2008), first published in 1898.
was then recorded for Belgian Radio and subsequently broadcast by BBC Radio 3. A new production of *God's Liar*, with very different staging, was first performed in 2004 by the KlangBogen Festival by Neue Oper Wien directed by Stephan Bruckmeier.\(^{134}\) Like Casken’s first opera, *Golem* (1989), it explores themes of vanity, temptation and loss but, unlike *Golem*, it is not based on myth or legend but on a story about human characters facing real predicaments, temptations and losses.

The libretto, a collaboration between the composer and Emma Warner, is an interlacing of the lives of two central male characters from very different societies, nineteenth-century Russia and twentieth-century Britain/America, creating an overall scenario that is, according to the composer, about ‘the foolishness of men and their demise through weakness of sexuality’.\(^{135}\) The nineteenth-century element of the libretto is based on Leo Tolstoy’s (1828-1910) novella *Father Sergius*, written towards the end of Tolstoy’s life when he was obsessed with questions of religion, ethics and morality. In the field of literary criticism, it is generally studied in conjunction with *The Kreutzer Sonata* (1889) and *The Devil* (1889) as one of his sexual tales.\(^{136}\) These three were written within a short space of time and represent ‘Tolstoy’s final fictional statement on the relations between men and women and his preoccupation with sex as the central theme.’\(^{137}\) *Father Sergius* tells the story of Stepan Kasatsky, an ambitious officer in the Imperial Guard in nineteenth-century St Petersburg who discovers his fiancée is also the Tsar’s mistress. As a result, he resigns his commission, changes his name to Father Sergius and becomes a hermit, but is unable to resist the attentions of a series of fallen women and this sets him on a downward path to

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\(^{135}\) John Casken, Interview with the author (10 October 2013).


destruction. The end of the opera sees him begging on twentieth-century streets (as the two elements of the story converge) wracked with guilt for giving into temptation and betraying his faith.

The twentieth-century narrative is woven into the drama from the beginning of the opera in alternating scenes, until the final scene when the two centuries converge. It concerns a young academic, Stephen, who is researching and translating the diaries of the hermit, Father Sergius. Longing for the recognition he believes his research is due, he betrays his principles and allows his literary agent to persuade him to sell his work, which is then rewritten and made into a Hollywood film where it is misrepresented in the interests of sensationalist drama. The resulting realisation of where his pride has led causes his crisis of identity and eventual destruction. The idea of writing a parallel, modern equivalent storyline associated with the celebrity culture industry was designed to create an opera that was more than just a retelling of Tolstoy’s novella, making the subject matter more interesting and relevant to a contemporary audience, although not all critics agreed that this was the outcome as the discussion concerning audience reception later in this chapter indicates. It also presented the possibility of moving backwards and forwards in time through the course of the opera, a technique known as time shifting. This is often used effectively in literature, television and cinema, and examples include *The Odyssey* (2004) by Simon Armitage. It is also a technique that is anticipated being used in the opera *Daedalus*, currently under discussion between the poet Simon Armitage and the composer, Philip Grange.

In order to appreciate fully the significance of the trials and temptations faced by Stepan Kasatsky, who later becomes Father Sergius, it is first essential to have some

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138 John Casken, Interview with the author.
139 Ibid.
140 Philip Grange, Conversation with the author (13 June 2015).
understanding of the social, cultural and religious mores of the era in which Tolstoy lived and worked, as well as an appreciation of his views in relation to female sexuality.

Throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, Russian society became increasingly fascinated by pre-Petrine culture, including its arts, architecture, music, religion and literature. As a result, a number of writers, including Tolstoy, became interested in hagiography and began to use its themes and devices in their own work. This included the retelling of legends and the creation of new hagiography, as well as the adaptation of hagiographic themes and devices for use in narratives that were antithetical to the spirit of the lives of saints and therefore portrayed the main protagonist in a more negative light. Father Sergius is a good example of the final category, presenting a psychological analysis of the consequences of vanity by changing the image/identity of the main character as he passes through the different phases of an orthodox religious life, described by Whittall as being ‘torn between sensuality and spirituality’. Tolstoy’s interest in this aspect of the story is clear from the entry in his notebook on 8 July 1890 where he wrote that, ‘its whole interest lies in the psychological stages that Father Sergius passes through.’ In keeping with the traditions of hagiography, Tolstoy exploits aspects of the lives of fourteenth-century saints in his analysis, naming his hero after Russia’s ‘most beloved monastic saint, Sergius of Radonež,’ and drawing on the legend of the Phoenician hermit Iakov the Faster for inspiration. He, like Father Sergius, achieved fame as the result of performing many miracles, and also tried to resist the advances of a series of fallen women by self-inflicted pain before finally succumbing to temptation. However, unlike these legends, Father Sergius is not set in medieval Russia but in the nineteenth century, and therefore also reflects the social and

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141 Margaret Ziolkowski, ‘Hagiographical Motifs in Tolstoy’s “Father Sergius”’, South Atlantic Review, 47 (1982), 63-80, at 63.
143 Margaret Ziolkowski, ‘Hagiographical Motifs in Tolstoy’s “Father Sergius”’, 63.
144 Ibid., 65.
145 Ibid., 64.
moral conventions of that age. The librettists have kept faithfully to the essential details of Tolstoy’s story, and thus the nineteenth-century element of God’s Liar also reflects themes and devices of hagiography as Tolstoy interpreted them, but using the bare minimum number of words in order to ensure clarity. The result is that in places the opera lacks some of the complexities found in the novella to the point where, according to Nick Kimberley’s review of the first performance, ‘it fails to convey the essence of the story in places requiring the audience to have read the supporting programme notes.’

According to Greene, ‘there is no novelist greater than Tolstoy at understanding the relation of an individual life to that of the community’, and this understanding was used to good effect in the portrayal of his fictional characters. Thus, in keeping with the rest of Tolstoy’s novels, Stepan/Father Sergius’s identity is closely related to his occupation and to the social hierarchy and conventions of the time. Russian society at the end of the nineteenth century was, like Britain, patriarchal and strictly hierarchical. Tsarist political structures, religious and social values and the Russian legal system all reinforced the social hierarchy and defined both position and status.

As an officer in the Imperial Guard and a member of the Tsar’s household Stepan was in a position that gave him high status in Russian society and this is the foundation for his pride and vanity. Consequently, he has a high opinion of himself, which is expressed through the pride he has for his achievements so far, and the expectations he has for his future advancement. The short opening scene of the opera is devoted to portraying his vanity as he sings just one word, ‘I’, throughout, while four officers of the Imperial Guard describe him as ‘brilliant and handsome, proud and ambitious…unequalled…gifted and intelligent…a

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brilliant swordsman…an exemplary officer…'149 This scene is a condensed version of the opening of the book and therefore reflects Tolstoy’s characterisation of Stepan. It also emphasises the importance Tolstoy paced on the close association between an individual’s identity and the professional reputation they had acquired. Just as with the twentieth-century academic, Stephen, the idea of a name being associated with something of value (in Stepan’s case his position in society) is an important part of an individual’s identity.

The next scene in the opera is closely linked to the first in terms of the narrative and is an important element of the plot, establishing as it does, the reason for Stepan’s need to escape. It portrays a scenario that typifies the period’s patriarchal sexual ideology that defined women as either angelically pure or fallen. Indeed female subjugation was a fundamental precept of the patriarchal structures that underpinned domestic stability, which in turn was understood to be essential for political stability in Russia.150 Thus, when Stepan discovers his fiancée has been the Tsar’s mistress, and is in fact a courtesan, he believes she has betrayed him as the following extract from the libretto demonstrates:

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Stepan: You gave yourself to him!
Marie: I was his mistress.
Can you forgive me?
Stepan: My God, what have you done?
You’ve betrayed me! Humiliated me!
And the Tsar – the Tsar took me for a fool!
A Man’s pride cannot take such hurt!
Damm you! Damm you all!
Damm the world and its vanity!151
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This was despite the countess having forgiven him for initially courting her with the less than honourable motive of furthering his ambition to rise to a higher position in society, and not for love,\textsuperscript{152} as this extract from Scene 1/2 demonstrates:

Stepan: So, let me confess:

I wanted to be accepted by society,

accepted, through you.

I was willing to use you to rise in the world.

Jackson suggests that in the novella this episode is an expression of Tolstoy’s ‘ruthless critique of a generation of men who, while condoning impurity in themselves, required angelic purity in their women.’\textsuperscript{153} He further maintains that Tolstoy satirises Stepan’s account of his feelings for the countess to reinforce his criticism. Stepan’s disillusionment with his fiancée and consequent damage to his pride leads him to a despair that forces him to abandon his career as a member of the Imperial Guard in favour of escaping to a life in service to the church. The damage to his pride is exacerbated by his inability to confront the Tsar, as he might usually be expected to do. This is consistent with what Jackson describes as the ‘Oedipal pattern in the drama’,\textsuperscript{154} and that it is the Tsar’s role as a father figure within this context that makes it difficult for Stepan. There is also the issue of the Tsar’s status within Russian society and the possible consequences for challenging his behaviour such as exile to Siberia.

In scene 1/3 of the opera members of the chorus appear to mock Stepan’s vanity and his hasty retreat form the Tsar’s court in their narration of the events following the countess’s


\textsuperscript{153} Robert L. Jackson, ‘Father Sergius and the Paradox of the Fortunate Fall’, 464.

\textsuperscript{154} Ibid.
revelation. However, the programme note that accompanied the first performance suggests that the scenes 1/2 and 1/3 just depict ‘the brilliant young Stepan Kasatsky betrayed by his fiancée’,\textsuperscript{155} and whilst Casken and Warner clearly demonstrate that he loses his position in society and his fiancée (in part as a result of pride and vanity), the scenes do not portray the condemnation Jackson suggests Tolstoy intended. In fact, Casken and Warner take for granted the Countess’s status as a fallen woman, and the consequent assumption that she is to blame for Stepan’s inability to live with what she has done. Thus, they indicate her betrayal is what forces him to ‘abandon the world and escape to the church’.\textsuperscript{156} Although the librettists have portrayed the countess in a way that is consistent with both the source material and her identity as a high-class nineteenth-century courtesan, their approach to her characterisation and that of all the women in this opera have been the subject of some criticism. The incident discussed here is possibly one example of the portrayal of female sexuality that prompted Andrew Clements’s remarks in his review of God’s Liar accusing the composer of misogyny for allowing the women in the opera to take the blame for everything that went wrong in the lives of the male protagonists. His comments are discussed more fully later in this chapter.

There are many other examples of courtesans portrayed in opera, particularly in the nineteenth century, and Verdi’s Violetta is perhaps the most well known and loved of these. She is not depicted in the same way as the countess is in God’s Liar however. Casken uses his portrayal as a means to explain Stepan’s sudden departure from the Tsar’s court and the beginning of his downfall, thus underling her ‘disgraced status’ in the eyes of his hero. By contrast Verdi’s portrayal of Violetta celebrates the pleasures of sexual liberty and independence for his heroine, which is in direct contravention of nineteenth-century ideas.

about women’s sexuality and their place in society as wives and mothers. In doing so, he forces nineteenth-century hypocrisy into the limelight. Verdi allows her to have centre stage, to be loved and admired. The premiere in London in 1856 caused a scandal with reviews that stated that the opera brought ‘an exhibition of harlotry to the public stage.’

From a nineteenth-century perspective, as Rutherford suggests, ‘Violetta’s use of her body as a means of purchasing or experiencing pleasure lay in the dangerous realm of sensation.’ This concern regarding the glamorisation of prostitution was a symptom of the fear of what prostitution represented at the time: social disintegration and the dangers associated with contagion, disease and death. The number of prostitutes in London was estimated to be approximately 7,000 in the middle of the nineteenth century, representing the fourth largest female occupation at the time. As such it was considered to be an increasing threat to middle-class respectability.

Tolstoy gives his hero a new identity when he leaves the Imperial Guard, again based on his profession, this time that of a monk. Tolstoy’s portrayal of Father Sergius was not only influenced by the themes found in hagiography, as already discussed, but also in the socio-religious context of Russia at the end of the nineteenth century. The Russian Orthodox Church had once been a powerful institution but its moral authority had eroded during the nineteenth century and consequently its income had fallen and most members of the clergy, like the hermit Father Sergius, were poor. The peasantry who made up a good number of the membership but were more interested in observance of fasts and processions than attendance at church, the religious observance of the aristocracy and members of the intelligentsia tended

159 Susan Rutherford, *Verdi, Opera, Women*, 111.
to be notional. Thus, the contrast between the luxury and status of Stepan’s old life and that of a monk should perhaps have been enough to rid him of his vanity. Traditionally, a person in his position would be expected to demonstrate piety, chastity and genuine humility. However, Father Sergius as Stepan now calls himself, struggles to gain humility. To achieve it he must, as Jackson suggests, ‘lose his pride and lofty sense of perfection’\(^{163}\) that came with the belief that he had been a model soldier and now believes he can be an exemplary monk.\(^{164}\) Although he has gone through the motions of giving himself to the church by selling all his worldly goods, including all the land he owns, as well as taking vows of chastity, he has not lost what is at the very foundation of his pride, his belief in his own innocence and purity. However, he was also determined to make a name for himself in the new life he was forced to adopt, thus, ultimately, it is Stepan’s pride and desire for recognition that pave the way for his downfall.\(^{165}\) In Russian hagiography, monks who are destined to become saints are not usually depicted as having the failings with which Tolstoy endowed his hero. However, it is in keeping with the antithetical nature of this story and allows Tolstoy (and Casken) to demonstrate that Father Sergius’s salvation can only be achieved by the loss of the innocence that he prizes so highly. It is only then that he will no longer be proud and vain and will finally understand the truth of the message running all through the opera, ‘one good deed, one cup of water, worth more than all the good, worth more than all the lies.’\(^{166}\)

On the basis of the discussion above, it seems that for the libretto to deliver a convincingly equivalent scenario, the twentieth-century academic, Stephen, needs to be imbued with a similar level of pride and vanity in his achievements and reputation as is demonstrably evident in Stepan, as well as a comparable level of betrayal when he discovers how his research has been abused.

\(^{163}\) Robert L. Jackson, ‘Father Sergius and the Paradox of the Fortunate Fall’, 465.
\(^{164}\) Ruth Benson, \textit{Women in Tolstoy}, 118.
\(^{165}\) Margaret Ziolkowski, ‘Hagiographical Motifs in Tolstoy’s “Father Sergius”’, 68.
\(^{166}\) John Casken and Emma Warner, \textit{God’s Liar}, passim.
The choice of an academic as the twentieth-century counterpart to Father Sergius was a means of establishing a parallel need to retreat into an isolated, cloistered environment as an essential part of their respective identities. The scholar’s study provided seclusion and solitude to work and was used as a parallel for the hermit’s sanctuary, a place that provided him with somewhere to escape from the world and separate himself from temptation. It also enabled the interaction between their two worlds as Stephen reads from the diaries in scene 2/2 of the libretto.

Casken and Warner describe Stephen’s study as ‘a book-lined coffin’, in which he shuts himself away in isolation writing but failing to achieve recognition. The metaphor of a coffin resonates with Father Sergius’s religious identity, and in his case the hermitage is, arguably, not a sanctuary as it should be, but more like a self-inflicted prison that he has escaped to in order to protect himself from the temptations of the world, and in particular the temptations of women. However, it does not protect him from his thoughts and whilst he remains there he is not finding the answers that he seeks, and is failing truly to become the holy man that he aspires to be, as these words from the libretto demonstrate:

Sergius

O God, deny me not my faith!
You showed me the way:
“Live as a hermit!
Solitude will subdue your pride!”

Whole days go by,
I pray on the cold floor,
My mind drifts…
I doubt, I remember, I desire…
My body is burnt up as an oven!

Lord, I left the world
to seek reward in a place with you.
What is that place? Where is that place?
Why can I not find it?
Maybe there is nothing there.

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167 John Casken, Interview with the author.
168 Ibid.
169 John Casken and Emma Warner, God’s Liar, Scene 2/2.
Thus, the librettists have contrived a parallel space for the male protagonists to inhabit. Further parallels are expressed by the appearance of temptation in the shape of Mary in Stephen’s study and Makovkina and the merchant’s daughter in the cave, and in the need to escape from the confines of their respective prisons. In addition to these parallels, there is also a parity in the nature of their identities in relation to truth; both are seeking it, the hermit in private meditations and Stephen in the hermit’s diaries. In the end, they both find it in the words running through the opera, ‘one good deed, one cup of water given without thought of reward is worth more than all the good ever worked for humankind.’

Casken and Warner gave Stephen’s literary agent, Mary, the identity of both lover and temptress. She has at some point in the past been Stephen’s lover and this is the justification given by the librettists for her role as a twentieth-century equivalent to the countess. However, although this may be justifiable in terms of the implicit level of trust between the two characters, and therefore the sense of betrayal when that trust is abused, being a lover in the twentieth century carries none of the negative connotations of transgression that it often did in the nineteenth. Casken portrays Mary as ‘bossy, efficient and manipulative,’ a description that may go some way to explaining Andrew Clements’ comment that the women in this opera are ‘presented as the source of every problem’.

Mary uses her intimate knowledge of Steven, and her understanding of the value he places on both his research and his reputation, to persuade him to sell his work to Hollywood so that it can be used to make a film, but does not seem to have made him aware of the loss of ownership he will suffer as a result. Her identity as temptress does not seem in doubt here as the extract from Scene 2/2 of the libretto below demonstrates:

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170 Ibid.
171 John Casken, Interview with the author.
Mary  
I’ve discussed the hermit’s diaries  
with people in Hollywood.  
The producer loves the idea,  
thinks it could run,  
a twenty million dollar movie  
with a hundred thousand advance  
and a percentage of the gross.  
All for your Father Sergius.  
A slim volume gathering dust on a shelf –  
Or we could turn him into…

Stephen (ironically)  
…manna from heaven!

Mary  
Look at the money you can earn,  
your room, like a cell –  
you’re throwing your life away!

Stephen  
My monk struggled all his life – for what?  
So you can put him in a multi-million dollar movie?

Mary  
To touch people,  
take them on a journey,  
to the depths of despair,  
to rise again, triumphant,  
with a message of hope –  
you could reach millions!

In order to understand whether the identity of a ‘temptress’ is consistent with the role of the literary agent in the twentieth century a brief exploration of the function of an agent in the production of celebrity seems appropriate. Mary’s identity as a literary agent conforms to what Allen describes as ‘have it all femininity’, that is represented in the ‘successful girl’ discourse of neoliberalism, and post-feminist ethics of sexual subjectification. This is associated with social mobility and ideas of compulsory success articulated through celebrity culture and other popular media.\textsuperscript{173} Although, unlike the celebrities they represent and help produce, the agents have a professional identity, rather than a more visible public identity. Achievement is gained vicariously through the level of exposure and fame the client

\textsuperscript{173} Su Holmes and Diane Negra, eds.,\textit{ In the Limelight and Under the Microscope}, 151.
Part of the role of the literary agent is to constantly be on the lookout for new talent and to exercise the significant power and influence they have as a result of being part of what Turner, Bonner and Marshall describe as a ‘massive filtration system for the entertainment industry’. Agents generally work on commission and this gives credence to the idea presented in the opera, that Mary’s desire to tempt Stephen to sell his research was an act of betrayal and that she could be viewed as a ‘temptress’. However, in this case, and unlike the nineteenth-century temptress, Makovkina, the temptation she represents is not overtly sexual, but instead associated with fame and fortune and therefore appropriate for a character associated with the celebrity culture industry.

Stephen’s real temptation seems to be the idea of having his name recognised and his research valued, if not by his peers, then by the rest of the world. For him, Mary’s suggestion that he could make a difference to other people by sharing the insights he has gained from the diaries that ‘plumb the very depths of the soul’ and reveal a truth that could change lives is an even greater temptation. It gives him the opportunity to look philanthropic whilst achieving his real ambition. In other words, in keeping with the aspirations to which celebrity culture so often aspires, he wants to be famous.

Name recognition is one of the features of the professional academic identity and an acknowledgement of achievement in a particular field, which takes on a significance and value in the university community where it has implications for funding and the opportunity of further research. This is usually achieved through exposure in appropriate peer-reviewed journals, books, or appearances at conferences, something that Stephen felt his work warranted, and the lack of even this acknowledgment contributed to the lure of Hollywood.

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177 John Casken, Interview with the author.
As Williams suggests, the desire for name recognition among academics is especially important in the humanities, where ‘the rewards are primarily symbolic rather than monetary.’\textsuperscript{178} However, literary celebrities, and this includes some academics, (Stephen Hawking for example) are, as Moran suggests, ‘particularly controversial figures within celebrity culture as a whole because of their position at the centre of an ongoing battle about the relationship between art and money in contemporary culture.’\textsuperscript{179}

The desire to be acknowledged and validated links directly into the discourse surrounding celebrity that centres round notions of identity, individuality, aspiration and empowerment, as discussed in chapter two. Furthermore, as Williams points out, the idea of an academic star has ‘become a naturalised feature of the academic landscape and generally acknowledged to be one of the more striking epiphenomenon in academic life over the past twenty years.’\textsuperscript{180} Although Williams associates fame with stardom,\textsuperscript{181} and the Hollywood film industry in particular, rather than the more general category of Rojek’s Achieved Celebrity\textsuperscript{182} as outlined in the previous chapter, he does acknowledge the limitations of doing so. As Epstein points out, ‘the academic star is really the academic celebrity and is now a fairly common figure in the Great Anglo-American universities,’\textsuperscript{183} where figures such as the physicist Brain Cox and theoretical physicist, Stephen Hawking, have become household names. Although Cox appears on television programmes, it could be argued that he has less claim to the term ‘celebrity’ than Hawking, whose personal life was the subject of an award winning film, \textit{The Theory of Everything} (2014) and therefore is very much in the public domain.

\textsuperscript{180} Jeffrey J. Williams, ‘Academostars: Name Recognition’, 371.
\textsuperscript{181} Ibid., passim.
\textsuperscript{182} Chris Rojek, \textit{Celebrity}, 17.
\textsuperscript{183} Joseph Epstein, ‘Celebrity Culture’, 15.
Having persuaded him to sell his work, Stephen feels betrayed by Mary when the diaries are used as the basis for a Hollywood movie, but are misrepresented in the process, turning them into something that he finds repugnant, but has no control over, a situation illustrated in the opera with the words, ‘No! Not that!’\textsuperscript{184} For him, this is the cause of the destruction of his professional identity and the reason for his downfall. Although Casken and Warner suggest Steven’s fall was instigated by the temptation presented to him by his agent, Mary, the nature of which would need to have the same destructive power as the temptation that Sergius faced and would therefore cause him to ‘abandon his ideals’,\textsuperscript{185} it is also possible to suggest that his downfall was as a result of his pride and thwarted ambition causing him to seek a new identity. This is comparable to Father Sergius entering the church. This crisis in identity may also have made him more vulnerable to the lure of fame and celebrity status and a desire to have his ‘fifteen minutes of fame’,\textsuperscript{186} The disparity between his desired identity and reality initiates his downfall, and it is therefore possible to argue that he was the author of his own demise. As mentioned in Chapter two, as far back as the ancient Greeks there are examples of individuals who ‘were destroyed by an ungovernable desire to be recognised for their uniqueness.’\textsuperscript{187} Examples include the fictional Ajax who lost to Odysseus in a contest and was so distraught that he went mad and slaughtered a herd of cattle before committing suicide by falling on his spear.\textsuperscript{188} This demonstrates that self-destruction as a result of thwarted ambition is not a new concept.

Although there are many parallels in the identities of Father Sergius and Stephen, there are also essential differences in the way in which their actions reflect and support the dominant social and moral norms of their century. Father Sergius is transgressive of the

\textsuperscript{185} John Casken, Interview with the author.
\textsuperscript{186} P. David Marshall, ed., \textit{The Celebrity Culture Reader}, 8.
\textsuperscript{188} Ibid.
norms (although he tries not to be). Tolstoy’s portrayal of his inner conflict and desire to dedicate himself to a life of abstinence is a reflection of Tolstoy’s dedication to the principle of chastity, a conviction made notorious by the publication of *The Kreutzer Sonata* (1889).\(^{189}\) Stephen’s actions on the other hand reflect a growing commitment to the investment of his individual identity in the celebrity culture industry. Father Sergius’s identity as a hermit sets him apart from society and endows him with moral authority. Humility, abstinence, self-denial and faith are all attributes that would have been expected of him and were typical of the teachings of the Russian Orthodox Church.\(^{190}\) The conflict he feels is the result of not being able to live up to society’s expectations and the possibility of public condemnation. As Whittall suggests, he is ‘torn between sensuality and spirituality’,\(^{191}\) Stephen, on the other hand, is, arguably, morally neutral as an academic, and since he does not transgress any twentieth-century moral code, his failure in terms of expectations are associated with the transgression of his personal integrity. In fact, it is, arguably, more likely that society would applaud rather condemn his efforts to be a celebrity, as it is increasingly a sought after status in contemporary society. Evidence for this can be provided by the number of talent shows on television such as *X-Factor, Britain’s Got Talent* or even *Opportunity*, in which members of the public were trained to be opera singers.\(^{192}\) As Andy Warhol’s quote, already referred to in the introduction, suggests, ‘"In the future, everyone will be world-famous for fifteen minutes."’\(^{193}\) In addition, their reaction, once the negative consequences of their actions become apparent, are essentially different. Whilst Father Sergius constantly battles temptations of the flesh, fighting an inner conflict with his personal demons, and only finds

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peace once he has been sent to Siberia where he is no longer faced with temptation, Stephen appears to be unaware of the full extent of the abuse of his work until he sees the ‘star’ act. (Discussion of the portrayal of the star with reference to the celebrity culture framework established in chapter two will be discussed later in this chapter). His involvement in the film industry reflects the modern obsession with celebrity culture and the desire to be famous. However, the seductive nature of the temptation they are faced with does appear to indicate some degree of parity, although not all commentators agree. Andrew Porter, for example, maintains that ‘Sergius's and Stephen's temptations run in uneasy, not always convincing parallel.’

Although there appear to be no contemporary operas that portray temptation as the cause of the downfall of men in the same way, the torment felt by Father Sergius as he battles his inner demons, and his eventual downfall because of his failure to fight them, arguably have some parallels in Britten’s Peter Grimes (1945), which depicts a man who is tormented by the inner demons that eventually destroy him. There are, however, operas that portray academics, or at least great thinkers. Brian Ferneyhough’s Shadowtime (1999-2004), for example, explores aspects of the writing and philosophy of Walter Benjamin from the point of view of his descent to the underworld, following his death with which the opera begins. The descent is more mythological than real, unlike the downfall of Sergius and Stephen in God’s Liar, and the opera full of allegory and multidimensional layering.

The portrayal of the fallen women in the nineteenth-century element of the story, the courtesan (Countess Marie Korotkova) who is discussed above, Makovkina (a wealthy widow in the opera, but a divorcee in Tolstoy’s novella) and the merchant’s daughter, are all imbued with attributes that reflect the author’s view of women generally and female sexuality

in particular. The following statement written in one of his early journals makes Tolstoy’s position clear:

> Regard the society of women as an inevitable evil of social life, and avoid them as much as possible. Because from whom do we actually learn voluptuousness, effeminacy, frivolity in everything and a multitude of other vices, if not from women? Who is responsible for the fact that we lose such feelings inherent in us as courage, firmness, prudence, equity, and so on, if not women? ¹⁹⁵

According to Benson the consequence of Tolstoy’s belief that women were dangerous indicated that ‘men in the pursuit of a rationally conceived and morally dedicated life are torn by the contradictory convictions of the spirit and the desires of the flesh, just as Father Sergius is, and are consequently, vulnerable to temptation and in constant danger of capitulating to their lowest instincts.’ ¹⁹⁶ From a twenty-first century perspective these views are extreme and do not permit the possibility that men were equally responsible for the way in which they conduct relationships with the opposite sex. Although Benson maintains that they reflected the views of Tolstoy’s time and his class, there are examples of nineteenth-century novelists and artists who took a more sympathetic view of fallen women. Examples include Charles Dickens and George Moore and the Pre-Raphaelite artist Ford Madox Brown, whose dramatic painting, *Take Your Son, Sir* directly challenges the condemnation of fallen women in a bold and confrontational manner. In addition, Tolstoy appeared to have been more sympathetic in his personal life than in print, openly supporting his sister when she gave birth to an illegitimate child.

Makovkina, a wealthy, eccentric divorcee is one of the temptress figures in the opera. Divorced women were considered to be morally transgressive in nineteenth-century Russian society, which had clear rules about the institution of marriage and its importance in underpinning the domestic and political stability of the country. The Imperial Law Code of 1857 only permitted a divorce to be granted by the church, and since the Russian Orthodox Church regarded marriage as a Holy sacrament that could not be dissolved, except under exceptional circumstances\(^\text{197}\) (such as one partner being deported to Siberia), divorce was rare and carried the risk of social disgrace.

Makovkina therefore already had a certain reputation, and it is clear from Tolstoy’s writing that her behaviour, which ‘amazed and shocked the town’,\(^\text{198}\) only served to enhance this impression and to compound her status as a fallen woman. In scene 3 of the opera the librettists have likened her to the devil as Sergius sings the words ‘Good God! Even here the devil pursues me in a woman’s form.’\(^\text{199}\) Her entry into the story represents a pivotal moment both in the book and in Casken’s opera and is the ‘first powerful moment of sexual temptation in the story’.\(^\text{200}\) It was at this point Sergius has the strength to resist Makovkina’s advances, but only by causing enough pain to drive away temptation by severing a finger. This incident is a reference to the teaching of Christ in Matthew 5:30 and in keeping with hagiographical influence on the text. As Benson points out, such an extreme measure is also evidence of the constant torment Sergius suffers as a result of the ‘discrepancy between his intentions and his weakness. As a hermit he is afraid of close personal contact with real, and therefore imperfect and dangerous, women as he cannot trust his self-control.’\(^\text{201}\) His action has the desired result and has the additional consequence of converting Makovkina, who

\(^{197}\) Rosamund Bartlett, \textit{Tolstoy}, 242.
\(^{198}\) Leo Tolstoy, \textit{Father Sergius}, 24.
becomes a nun. Jackson points out that ‘Tolstoy himself regarded this depiction of a fallen
woman’s attempted seduction of Father Sergius as ‘one of his greatest artistic
achievements’.

Her characterisation as a sexual predator, or femme fatale, is a
representation of female sexuality that was later explored by Alban Berg in Lulu (1934).

Carmen is another example of a temptress whose dangerous sexual allure lead to the downfall
of a man. Her seduction of the naïve soldier, Don José, causes him to leave his childhood
sweetheart and desert his military duties, ultimately leading to his demise. Bizet portrays
Carmen as a free spirit in a way that is more reminiscent of Lulu than the tradition nineteenth
century fallen woman. Unlike Makovkina she remains unrepentant seeing the use of her
sexuality as the only means of helping herself. As McClary suggests, the opera is ‘organised
in terms of traditional Western dichotomy between proper and improper female sexuality,
between the virgin and the whore’, with Don José’s childhood sweetheart representing the
nineteenth-century ideal and Carmen the dangerous temptress.

Makovkina’s twentieth-century equivalent is the star who plays her in the Hollywood
adaptation of Stephen’s research: the diaries of Father Sergius. Casken describes the star as a
‘temptress and sex goddess, a Marilyn Monroe’. She is the only character in God’s Liar to
be based on the life and images of a real person, rather than a fictional character, and is the
most significant representative of celebrity culture in the opera. Casken and Warner draw on
a number of aspects of Monroe’s life in their portrayal including the suggestion that their star
comes from a similar, difficult background (Monroe spent some time in her early life in foster
care when her mother became mentally ill and was sectioned). The rise to stardom of
individuals such as Monroe recognises the power of the individual in modern celebrity

202 Robert Jackson, ‘Father Sergius and the Paradox of the Fortunate Fall’, 471.
203 Susan McClary, Feminine Endings: Music, Gender and Sexuality (Minneapolis and London: University of
204 John Casken, Interview with the author.
205 Ibid.
culture to achieve fame and recognition regardless of their social background. Identification with stars like Monroe, and other celebrities who have Achieved Celebrity status without the assistance of an advantageous background, is one of the reasons why so many individuals compete in shows such as *The Voice* and *Opportunity* in the hope creating a new identity for themselves as well as gaining public recognition.

Marilyn Monroe’s iconic image as a sex goddess is at the heart of Casken and Warner’s characterisation of the star. In the 1950s when she was a star of the film industry and a pin-up in *Playboy* magazine there were particular ideas about what female sexuality represented and, because Monroe acted out those ideas, she came to represent the embodiment of female sexuality. Her public identity was publicised and perceived as an erotic female object, which represented both pure femininity and immoral female sexuality. This was expressed in film roles where she initially played ‘the girl’, an unnamed figure defined solely by gender and sex appeal, and in publicity that reinforced this image and characterised her as a dumb blood bombshell. As a model for *Playboy* magazine Monroe pushed the boundaries of what was acceptable and, in a move that almost caused a scandal, she posed for nude photographs that appeared on the front page. Whilst *Playboy* and Monroe defined these images as an expression of ‘guiltiness and natural female sexuality,’ Hollywood was scandalised by the association with nude pin-ups, perceiving them as a threatening sexual force. Even the United States Army became involved in the debate, banning an explicit photograph taken of her in 1952. It is both her image as a sex goddess, and her willingness to pose for nude photographs that Casken and Warner draw on in their portrayal of the star, as in scene 4 of the opera. She plays the part of Makovkina in a

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209 Ibid.
lurid, suggestive fashion and, unlike Tolstoy’s version of this event, she is successful in seducing the monk. She also sings the message of the opera - ‘one good deed, one cup of water, worth more than all the good, worth more than all the lies’ with contempt, indicating the lack of respect she, and the Hollywood film maker who bought the dairies, have for the integrity of Stephen’s research.

Dyer states that ‘stars matter because they act out what matters to a society’ either reinforcing the social and moral norms or exposing ideological inconsistencies as Monroe did in her association with *Playboy Magazine*. The image of Monroe as a ‘sex goddess’ is, as all representations of sexual images must be, culturally and historically specific, since their meaning alters from culture to culture and from century to century. Ideas of female sexuality in western society, and in particular in Britain and America, have changed significantly since the middle of the twentieth century. In the discourses surrounding Gendered Politics the image created by Marilyn Monroe carries negative implications of female subjugation and domination in an overtly patriarchal context, and does not engage with discourses associated with intelligence and equality. This then raises some issues in relation to the possible equivalence of Makovkina and the star who plays her in the twentieth century. Whilst the seduction of Father Sergius certainly presents the same scene being played out in two different centuries, and in that respect it is possible to argue that the librettists have succeeded in creating an equivalent scenario, it also raises questions about whether the portrayal of female sexuality from two different centuries can be regarded as equivalent. Makovkina, as a divorcee and a fallen woman clearly transgresses the moral and social norms of her century. However, although the star is based on an aspect of the identity of Marilyn Monroe that could

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be viewed as transgressive, or at least shocking, as the nude images of her were, sexually explicit scenes in modern celebrity culture, and in films in particular, are not.

Marilyn Monroe is also the subject of Gavin Bryars’s chamber opera, *Marilyn Forever* (2010-2013), which examines her intellectual and emotional relationship to death, love and ambition in the context of her stardom, image as a sex goddess and self-destruction. The opera is based on the last night of her life and, as Bryars suggests, portrays the ‘trajectory of her life through relationships, fame and myth to her ultimate destruction and tragic end.’ The soprano who sings the part of Marilyn, is, like the soprano in both Strauss’s *Elektra* and *God’s Liar*, on stage almost continuously and the male soloist performs a similar multifaceted role to that of Casken’s soprano and plays various men in Monroe’s life. Further, Marilyn is not only a significant figure in the context of *God’s Liar*, but is also an important icon in the life of Anna Nicole Smith, the heroine of Mark-Anthony Turnage’s opera, who aspired to be like her. A detailed exploration of this aspect of Turnage’s opera is discussed in chapter five.

The encounter with the star in the opera is the moment when Stephen realises that he has been betrayed by both Mary, his agent, and his own pride and vanity. Although he shouts ‘Cut’ he is ignored because he no longer has control over his work. He has literally sold out, and there is no way back. The star’s lack of understanding of the value of his original vision reflects the contemporary tendency to want to demystify ‘high art’ and make it accessible to a mass market. This is expressed in the libretto in the following exchange:

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Stephen: I hoped to reach people with this story
…I wanted to help them face the truth!

Star: I! I! I! How Vain,
With your grand words.
What about me? What about them?
Have you ever stopped to think
what anyone else might want?

Stephen: Art is not about what others want!

Star: Look at them! They don’t want art,
they want escape. Just like you.

Star: …You’re all the same, you sunset boys,
coming here with your starlit dreams,
the meaning of the universe
in the palm of your hands.
Sunsets here are painted canvas,
stars, nothing but holes in the painted sky.

She also expresses modern society’s obsession with fame and the supposition that it is what everyone desires, as implied by Andy Warhol, with the words ‘Look at you – I’m about to make you famous, and you act like it is the end of the world!’

The lure of Hollywood, with all its promises and trappings, is thus intended not only to provide an equivalent level of enticement for Stephen as Makovkina and the Merchant’s

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Daughter do for Sergius, but also the same sense of betrayal as Stepan felt when he discovered the countess had been the Tsar’s mistress. However, although Mary plays a pivotal role in initiating Stephen’s downfall, by offering the possibility of selling his research to Hollywood to be made into a film, and also by actively manipulating him into accepting the offer, it is arguably the realisation of where his vanity has led that sets Stephen on the path to self-destruction.

The final nineteenth-century fallen women in the opera is the troubled daughter of a merchant, and it is Sergius’s failure to resist his biggest weakness and the consequences of his vanity and pride that causes him to lose finally everything. Following Makovkina’s conversion from fallen woman to nun he becomes famous for his healing powers. However, he fails to resist the sense of pride he feels at having resisted her advances, expressed in the opera by the words, ‘the greatest pride has been to overcome temptation. To enjoy my strength and wear it like a shield,’ or the material comforts offered by those that come for his help, and thus, his vanity still pursues him. Sergius’s final fall comes when he is seduced by the merchant’s daughter. As Benson points out, it ‘reads like a caricature of the temptation he faced with Makovkina,’ there was no passion, just an impersonal sexual act. In Tolstoy’s novella she is twenty-two and therefore old enough to understand what she is doing, although there is some indication that she might have a mental condition, and so her identity as a fallen woman has some degree of credibility. Casken and Warner’s characterisation of her mirrors Tolstoy’s novella, but she is sixteen rather than twenty-two and regarded by Casken as ‘innocent’, rather than a temptress. However, she is still portrayed as a temptress and at sixteen is not young enough to escape responsibility, as a

219 John Casken and Emma Warner, God’s Liar, Scene 5/2.
221 Ibid., 131.
222 John Casken, Interview with the author.
result she is another example of the portrayal of female sexuality that could have contributed to Andrew Clements’ criticism.

Benson suggests that when Tolstoy wants to portray a ‘good’ woman the only passions he allows her to express are for her family and Christian ideals of chastity, self-effacement and asceticism.223 This view is clearly expressed in the characterisation of Pasha, who is old, unattractive and therefore, in contrast to the other women in the story, not an object of sexual attraction. Her kindness and humility show Stepan the truth of how he should live and she therefore represents Tolstoy’s ‘ideal woman’.224 Tolstoy’s redemption for his fallen hero, which Jackson describes as a fortunate fall, comes when he is arrested for vagrancy and sent to Siberia, where he lives a manageable life without risks, tending vegetables, children and the sick with no challenges to his sexuality. Sergius demonstrates his now genuine humility by no longer seeking a new identity in which he can take pride, but by declaring that he is ‘without identification.’225 This is paralleled in the twentieth century with the loss of Stephen’s reputation and good name that came as a result of the abuse of his research in the interest of sensationalist drama. As a consequence he too has lost his identification as a respected academic.

The final scene in the opera brings the two separate elements of the story together. Stepan is seen begging on twentieth-century streets wracked with guilt for failing to live up to the expectations of the life of a hermit in nineteenth-century Russia. The youths who taunt him represent the negative and sometimes hostile attitude to the homeless that is prevalent in contemporary society. This serves to highlight the recurrent message of the opera that the way a society treats those individuals who have no social status, because they are poor or destitute, is a measure of the value and effectiveness of its moral codes. Stepan is rescued

223 Ruth Crego Benson, Women in Tolstoy, 119.
224 Robert L Jackson, ‘Father Sergius and the Paradox of the Unfortunate Fall’, 475.
225 Ibid., 476.
from the youths by Stephen and an unnamed twentieth-century woman, who is intended to be the contemporary equivalent of Pasha. According to Casken, she remained unnamed because she is there to represent all the aspects of female sexuality that have been portrayed throughout the opera: lover, seductress, temptress, innocent, friend, nurturer, confidante and saviour.²²⁶ Pasha and the unnamed woman have compassion and kindness in common and in that respect they could be considered to embody similar social values. However, Pasha, in common with all the other women in the opera, is a stereotype of one aspect of female sexuality, rather than a fully developed character. The unnamed woman on the other hand represents all women and all aspects of female sexuality, an idea also explored in Berg’s Lulu.

In composing the music for this opera Casken did not seek to characterise the nineteenth-century storyline through the adoption of a different musical style in order to distinguish it musically from the twentieth century. However, to have done so might have possibly mitigated the criticism of misogyny levelled against the work, as it could be understood as a way of distancing him personally from the nineteenth-century characterisation of the fallen women. Adès, for example, distances himself from the Duchess of Argyll by incorporating 1940s and 50s dance music into Powder Her Face, giving it a sense of time and place that is clearly not the composer’s. Instead, Casken has written contemporary music that only makes reference to aspects of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century elements. For example, there are references to Gregorian chant (sung by the chorus) that symbolises Father Sergius’s status as a monk in the nineteenth-century storyline and a ‘happy, clappy’ chorus that is a reference to the twentieth-century church’s propensity to favour this style of music as an accompaniment to contemporary hymns.²²⁷ In Scene 6

²²⁶ John Casken, Interview with the author.
²²⁷ Ibid.
Stepan’s act of begging on twentieth-streets is signalled in the music with the rattling of charity tins before the percussion is heard. There is a clear delineation, musically, between Father Sergius and the academic Stephen. Father Sergius is sung by a bass-baritone and Stephen by a tenor, giving them different vocal ranges but also colours and timbres. This becomes an important differentiation in relation to clarity in scenes where the two characters are both singing and commenting on one another. Whilst this would not be so much of an issue for the audience in the opera house, it becomes more significant whilst listening to the piece on CD. Uniquely all seven women in the opera are sung by one soprano, who has to change costumes and characters throughout the performance. There are a number of operas that have the main heroine on the stage for almost the entire performance, as mentioned above Strauss’s *Elektra* is one such example, but none where every female character is sung by one person. Although Casken does not use specific leitmotifs for the female protagonists he has created music that gives the ‘feel of the characters’. For example, he uses what he describes as ‘perky music’ for the agent’s first line (‘I hope I’m not intruding’) in Part I, Scene 2/2, in order to ‘convey a young woman in a manager’s suit and high heels coming in with a bossy little tone when she interrupts Stephen in his study’. In fact, the desire to use the music to expresses a feeling or emotion is the underlying creative impetus.

Some of the music for *God’s Liar* was tried out in Casken’s Violin Concerto (1994-5), commissioned by the BBC Philharmonic and premiered at the BBC Proms under Yan Pascal Tortelier. The story of the opera is reflected in the concerto’s structure and expressive profile. The Russian violinist Dmitri Sitkovetsky gave a ‘Russian voice’ to the first performance, expressing something of the essence of parts of the story of *God’s Liar* in concerto form: a sense of bravura, a sense of quiet containment within a religious confine or

\[228\text{Ibid.}\]
religious building, the idea of a confessional, pursuit and escape. The result was described by one reviewer as: ‘A violin part which combined dark lyricism, explosive and sparkling virtuosity, and the ability to capture the tragic tone’.

The music and words are vital and convey the essence of the opera, but the production and staging can also add symbolism and meaning that enhances the overall cohesion of the work. In the first performance of *God’s Liar* the stage was divided diagonally from front to back and out over the orchestral pit by a lit blue line - a time-line, symbolically and physically dividing the nineteenth- and twentieth-century action. The only thing on stage was the Hollywood scene. The singers were not permitted to cross the line and could only occupy their century’s space. The soprano, who was all the women of the opera, was the only character who was permitted to walk along the line, symbolically releasing her from the confines of either century’s moral mores. She was also the only character to pass from one century to another, with the exception of Sergius who crossed to the twentieth century at the very end of the opera.

In Vienna the production was staged in a huge warehouse, with the orchestra behind the performing area. The only things on stage were three enormous letters spelling the word Ich (I in German, and the only word sung by Stepan in the first scene of the opera). The giant ‘H’ was the place where the hermitage was placed, and the only way up to it was via a pair of tall ladders. This was used to dramatic effect to demonstrate the dangerous nature of the fallen woman/star, not just for the hermit but also for herself. The soprano, as Makovkina, dressed like Jacqueline Kennedy with scarf, sunglasses, fur coat and big stiletto heels, so that the audience was uncertain which century she belonged to, and in an attempt to indicate the parallels between Makovkina and the star. This would perhaps have been clearer if she had

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229 Ibid.
been dressed as Marilyn Monroe on whom the star is modelled. She then climbed the ladder in her heels whilst singing. At the top she took her coat and heels off. The impact was dramatic and the symbolism clear – what Makovkina was doing was dangerous both morally and, because of the ladders, physically. According to Casken, the audience was ‘aghast at what was happening in the drama because of the explicit nature of the sexual scenes and aghast at the physical danger that the singer was being placed in’.231 This production demonstrates the importance of the interaction between the music, words and staging to communicate the message of the opera in a way that will make the greatest impact. It also supports the composer’s vision of parallel storylines.

The critical reaction to this opera has been mixed, mainly due to the nature of the source material. Initially the suitability of the nineteenth-century subject matter was raised by a number of people, including the Northumberland playwright, Michael Wilcox, who, when consulted prior to Casken embarking on the project, was concerned that the material was ‘not appropriate for an opera as it did not have anything to say to a contemporary audience’.232 Casken is, of course, not the only contemporary composer to have used source material that did not originate in the twentieth century. There are numerous examples including Thomas Ades’s *The Tempest* (2004), Peter Maxwell Davies’s *Eight Song for a mad King* (1969) and Harrison Birtwistle’s *Gawain* (1991) and Hans Werner Henze’s *Boulevard Solitude* (1952) that is a retelling of Prévost’s *Manon Lescaut* (1731) set in Paris after the Second World War. However, it is the impact of the nineteenth-century material that concerned critics such as Andrew Clements who point to a portrayal of female sexuality that appears to perpetuate the moral values of nineteenth-century society with regard to fallen women, but in a contemporary setting where it has no place, thus suggesting a misogynist outlook.233

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231 The description of the Viennese production and the audience reaction to it was discussed in the interview with John Casken.
232 John Casken, Interview with the author.
Benson’s analysis of Father Sergius supports the librettist’s interpretation of the role the fallen women play in the downfall of the central character. She maintains that in each of the three works that make up the trio of The Kreutzer Sonata, The Devil and Father Sergius the central male characters are portrayed as personally and socially brilliant aristocrats, whose lives are ruined by events that centre on women. She points out that Tolstoy regarded real women as either ‘sexual agents or sexual objects thus assuming that they used their sexuality as an end in itself or to secure selfish wishes, thus they became the scapegoats for men’s guilt.’

Although this is evident in the opera’s nineteenth-century storyline Andrew Clements’s criticism is not restricted to Tolstoy’s characters but extends it to the twentieth-century women as well.

Any adaptation of source material that contains views that are unacceptable in a contemporary setting runs the risk of perpetuating, or at least appearing to condone them, especially if the reinterpretation remains true to the original in spirit as well as content. The additional difficulty in God’s Liar is the intention to produce an equivalent scenario and parallel characters that inevitably leads to some degree of parity in characterisation. Framed within the confines of nineteenth-century social and moral mores it is difficult to argue that Tolstoy intended anything other than the blame for Sergius’s demise be placed with the three fallen women despite his critique of the aristocracy at the beginning of the novella. Or indeed to argue that Casken has done anything other than to mirror that intention.

However, the twentieth-century storyline is not just a straightforward representation of nineteenth-century values superimposed on the twentieth-century characters. The star clearly reflects 1950s ideas about female sexuality, and the image of Marilyn Monroe in particular. These were framed around the dumb blond persona, thus she too could be viewed as a sexist representation of female sexuality, particularly when considered in reference to

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feminist ideology. Ideas about female sexuality at the turn of the twentieth century, when this opera was being composed, had changed significantly since the 1950s and it might therefore be reasonable to expect that those changes would be reflected in the characterisation of the star. However, even if Casken had drawn on the life of a contemporary Hollywood star, such as Demi Moore or Angelina Jolie, the characterisation could still have attracted criticism since the identity of both these stars as modern day sex symbols relies on contemporary ideas about ideal female images relating to physical attributes. The portrayal of Mary, whilst acknowledging her role as a temptress, also draws on the idea of her as an independent, career orientated individual in a contemporary situation that is far removed from that of her nineteenth-century counterparts.

In creating a libretto that interweaves an adaption of Tolstoy’s novella with the twentieth-century tale of an academic who succumbs to the lure of Hollywood at the manipulative hands of his agent and former lover, Casken offers the opportunity to compare the patriarchal social and moral values of the nineteenth century in relation to fallen women with the discourse surrounding women who are part of the contemporary celebrity culture industry. The similarities that exist in terms of seduction, manipulation and betrayal in both centuries, arguably have an equivalence in terms of the effect they have on the two male protagonists, who are literally or metaphorically seduced into surrendering their ideals and into succumbing to the temptation that heralds their downfall. It is clear that although the women are all integrated into a cohesive and generally convincing plot they still remain very much part of their own century’s social and moral milieu. This inevitably leaves the composer open to accusations of misogyny as a result of the comparisons he tries to draw between the nineteenth- and twentieth-century women in order to establish cohesion in the plot. The very specific views of female sexuality in the 1950s does nothing to dispel this impression. The possible counter argument is that the twentieth-century women are not
transgressive in the way their nineteenth-century counterparts are and therefore there is no suggestion that their behaviour violates modern standards of morality.

*God’s Liar’s* contribution to the discourses surrounding celebrity culture mostly lies in the characterisation of Marilyn Monroe in the guise of the star.\(^{235}\) The portrayal of 1950s female sexuality and the social and cultural significance of her image as star contribute to the discussion relating to the rise of stardom in Britain and America and its importance as a fundamental aspect of celebrity culture. Her portrayal is also an important point of reference for the discussion of identification and aspiration, both in terms of their relevance within the framework of celebrity culture studies and as an important part of the discussion relating to Anna Nicole Smith in chapter five. The desire for fifteen minutes of fame and the current obsession with celebrity status is reflected in the portrayal of both Mary and Stephen. The whole opera reflects the depth of investment in particular identities\(^{236}\) that is a significant underlying feature of Tolstoy’s novella and of contemporary celebrity culture as discussed in chapter two.

The next chapter examines how scandal resulting from transgressive behaviour, as defined within a twentieth-century context, contributes to the discourses surrounding contemporary celebrity culture.

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\(^{235}\) How this is achieved is discussed on pp. 66/67 of this chapter.

Chapter 4

Scandal and Celebrity in *Powder Her Face*

Margaret, Duchess of Argyll was an enchantress, considered one of the most beautiful women of her generation and one of the best dressed in the world. Charming, elegant and gregarious, she was sought after, reported and photographed in the press as a Hollywood star. Margaret’s second marriage, to the Duke of Argyll, lasted only ten years, her divorce from him was the longest, costliest and most scandalous in British divorce history.237

In this chapter Thomas Adès’s first opera, *Powder Her Face* (1995), will be discussed within the framework discussed in chapter two with particular reference to the way in which scandal in the twentieth century relates to celebrity status and contributes to the discourses surrounding contemporary celebrity culture. The role of the media, and in particular the tabloid newspaper industry, in the creation of the scandal caused by the sexual exploits of the Duchess of Argyll will be also be explored within this framework. The controversial representation of female sexuality in this opera, its links with the operatic tradition, and the contribution it makes to the discourses surrounding the academic study of celebrity culture will also be considered.

*Powder Her Face* is a chamber opera in two acts written when both Adès and the librettist Philip Hensher were in their twenties. It was commissioned by Almeida Opera for a first performance at the Cheltenham Festival and is one of the first of a growing number of contemporary operas to deal with present-day socio-political issues explored through a portrayal of the lives of real people. Other examples include John Adams’s *Nixon in China* (1987) and *The Death of Klinghoffer* (1991), and Michael Daugherty’s *Jackie O* (1997), which portrays episodes in the life of Jackie Kennedy Onassis and like *Powder Her Face* is a

two-act chamber opera. Although Jackie O portrays America in the 1960s rather than Britain, there are parallels in lifestyles of the protagonists who both attracted a high level of media attention giving them the high visibility associated with celebrity status. Daugherty and his librettist Wayne Koestenbaum appear to have had no doubt about the celebrity influence on their opera, unlike Hensher, even including Elizabeth Taylor and Grace Kelly among the characters.

The scandalous and contentious nature of the subject matter has not prevented Powder Her Face from receiving over two hundred performances since its premiere, which, according to his publisher, makes it something of a modern classic. This is, of course, a biased view and one that is in the best interest of the publisher, as it will help promote Adès’s music. The success of Powder Her Face led to a commission for a full-scale work for the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, which resulted in The Tempest, premiered in 2004 and helped launch his international career.

Powder Her Face is set in a hotel room in the final years of the life of Margaret, Duchess of Argyll. Her story is told in two acts and through a series of six flashbacks that are framed by the first and last scenes set in the 1990s. The flashbacks recall significant events in the duchess’s life, including her wedding to the eleventh Duke of Argyll and the scandal caused by the sexually explicit photographs revealed in court during their divorce in 1963. As Arnold Whittall points out, the study of female sexual morality and the ‘context provided by “bad girl acquires an air of nobility” has parallels in other operas including La Traviata and Lulu.'
Adès and Hensher’s motivation for choosing the material for this opera was, according to Hensher, ‘a desire to find a contemporary subject that would be relevant to a modern audience, rather than producing an opera depicting the ancient world or a retelling of a legend.’ As a novelist Hensher also wanted the opportunity to write something from scratch, to own the creation, rather than have to adapt someone else’s material. His other prerequisite was to write something that would ‘entertain, amuse and shock.’ Although he claims there was no intention of producing a work that contained a social, moral or political message, it would be naïve to suppose the subject matter could do anything other than challenge contemporary ideas of morality, especially in light of the probable identity of the male participants in the infamous photographs. This view is supported by the use of just four singers in the opera, three of whom pass satirical comments about the Duchess throughout, giving the impression they are there to act as a moral compass.

Hensher is opposed to any suggestion that the Duchess of Argyll could be considered a celebrity. His argument is two-fold; firstly, in his view, celebrity culture is a construct of the 1990s and therefore not relevant when discussing the life of the Duchess of Argyll, (although he concedes that well-known individuals in the 1940s and 1950s frequently attracted media attention just as celebrities do today) and secondly, that she was not “famous for being famous” like other celebrities but famous for being a duchess.’ Neither of these claims appear to have any foundation in the light of the discussion in chapter two of this study which makes it clear that the defining feature of celebrity status is the individual’s visibility in the public arena and the level of interest expressed in intimate details of their

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242 Philip Hensher, Interview with the author. Although contemporary composers don’t routinely write operas whose subject matter is concerned with the portrayal of myth or legend, both Casken’s Golem (1989) and Harrison Birtwistle’s Gerwain (1991) do and were written within a few years of Powder Her Face. There have also been some more recent examples, including: Birtwistle’s The Minotaur (2008), The Corridor (2009) and The Cure (2015), and Stuart MacRae’s The Assassin Tree (2006).

243 Ibid.

244 Ibid.
personal life, regardless of the way in which they came to public attention. In addition, the essential element in the celebrification of individuals, the mass media industry, was already a fundamental component in the dissemination of celebrity culture. The rise of stardom and the idea of stars in the film industry making the transformation to celebrity status as their private identity entered the public domain was also increasingly commonplace. This evidence all serves to demonstrate that by the time of Margaret’s very public divorce in 1963 celebrity culture was firmly established. Thus, although the celebrity culture industry is constantly evolving and expanding with the advent of new forms of media (and has become increasingly significant as an expression of contemporary values in recent years) there seems little doubt that its origins go back to at least the nineteenth century and arguably well before that. Even Richard Schickel, who is most categorical in his insistence that there was no such thing as celebrity before the beginning of the twentieth century, has stated that the defining moment came in 1916 when Mary Pickford signed the first million dollar film contract. 246

Rojek’s designation of Ascribed Celebrity status, 247 as discussed in chapter two, clearly encompasses members of the aristocracy, thus, as a duchess (even by marriage) the Duchess of Argyll automatically falls into this category. Therefore Hensher’s assertion that she is ‘famous for being a duchess’ is an acknowledgement and confirmation of her celebrity status, not an exemption from it. This is not an indication that all duchesses and members of the aristocracy make the transition to high profile celebrity status however; in fact there are examples of duchesses, and other aristocrats in Britain, whose names rarely attract media attention. There are also those who become the centre of media attention for a relatively short time, Earl Spenser, brother of the late Diana, Princess of Wales, being one such example. His brief but intense period in the spotlight during the events surrounding Diana’s death, was at

246 Graeme Turner, Understanding Celebrity, 10-11.
247 Chris Rojek, Celebrity, 17.
its most poignant in his address during her funeral, where he articulated the unprecedented
grief of thousands of people around the world it through his eulogy. He also expressed
society’s growing concern relating to the apparently unstoppable power of the paparazzi and
the way in which mass media has ‘changed our lives and confused our sense of what
information is private and what should properly be made public.’\footnote{248} Finally, there are also
members of the aristocracy who have made the transition to high-profile celebrity status.
Diana, Princess of Wales is a clear example, as she fits the criteria in every respect. She had
very high visibility in all areas of the mass media, where her public persona and details of her
private affairs, eating disorder and unhappy marriage were constantly reported. Despite her
privileged background, her private sufferings were those that ordinary people could relate to
because many suffered from the same issues. This increased the para-social relationship bond
experienced by her fans and magnified their identification with her; ultimately this led to the
unparalleled global mourning at her death. This phenomenon is portrayed in Jonathan Dove’s
opera \emph{When She Died...Death of a Princess}, as already discussed in chapter two. As this
opera was written for television the feeling of intimacy with the characters, and therefore
with the identity of Diana, is enhanced by close up camera views of their faces, a technique
that is also used in the film version of \emph{Powder Her Face}. The staged versions of \emph{Powder Her
Face} also created intimacy, in part because the work only requires a chamber orchestra but
also because the staging was designed to enhance this. For example, the set of the Royal
Opera House production at the Linbury Studio Theatre included outsized reproductions of her
cosmetics, giving the illusion the audience were even closer to the action than they were.\footnote{249}

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\footnote{249} Described in a review by Edward Seckerson, ‘Powder Her Face, Royal Opera House: Linbury Studio
Theatre, London’, \emph{Independent Online} (accessed 24 February 2015), \url{http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-
entertainment/classical/reviews/powder-her-face-royal-opera-house-linbury-studio-theatre-london-846195.html}.}
In addition, Margaret was already famous as a socialite and heiress long before she became a duchess, and by the age of eighteen was constantly photographed and reported on by the press.\textsuperscript{250} Her ambition was to become a second Lady Cooper (1892-1968), who had been a prominent figure in society in London and Paris before the First World War and much admired by men. In 1930 Margaret became the debutante of the season and in the decade that followed became one of the most photographed women in the world and a style icon for millions, courting media attention wherever she went and featuring on the covers of newspapers and society magazines.\textsuperscript{251} As with contemporary socialites, such as Paris Hilton, Margaret can be placed in Rojek’s category of Attributed Celebrity,\textsuperscript{252} the significant media attention she received being the defining factor that confirmed her celebrity status. This is a particularly important with regard to Attributed Celebrity, where there no specific talent is required, just the need to be - as Boorstin suggested - ‘famous for being famous’.\textsuperscript{253} Further evidence of Margaret’s status can be found in the press reports of her first wedding to Charles Sweeny on 21 February 1933, when large crowds lined the streets to watch the bride and wedding procession pass and the two thousand members of the public gate-crashed the wedding ceremony to get a glimpse of the bride.\textsuperscript{254} The \textit{Times} reported that, ‘no sooner had the bridal procession moved up the isle than the swing doors on either side of the main entrance were besieged by women, who used elbows and umbrellas freely, fought their way into the church.’\textsuperscript{255} The public also closely followed other significant events in this marriage, including illness, pregnancy and death. This evidence of intense interest in her clearly supports the idea that even before she became a duchess Margaret had already achieved the celebrity status Hensher claims she could not have had.

\textsuperscript{250} Charles Castle, \textit{The Duchess Who Dared}, 2.
\textsuperscript{251} Ibid., 18.
\textsuperscript{252} Chris Rojek, \textit{Celebrity}, 18.
\textsuperscript{253} Daniel J Boorstin, \textit{The Image}, 57.
\textsuperscript{254} Charles Castle, \textit{The Duchess Who Dared}, 25.
\textsuperscript{255} Ibid, 26.
Margaret continued to attract media interest throughout her marriage and subsequent divorce from Charles Sweeny (Hensher gave Sweeny the name Mr Freeling in Act Two of *Powder Her Face*), with intimate details of her private life being the subject of tabloid newspaper columns and gossip magazines. When she became seriously ill with a kidney infection and pneumonia six months after her marriage to Sweeny, crowds gathered outside the hospital where she was treated and newspapers reported on her illness with dramatic headlines such as ‘Margaret Desperately Ill.’ As her marriage started to fail and Margaret discovered Sweeny was unfaithful, she too ignored the constraints of a Catholic marriage and began on a series of affairs. Her apparent predisposition to nymphomania reportedly became more pronounced and uninhibited following a fall down a lift shaft in 1945 when she sustained serious head injuries. However, it was the evidence presented at the high-profile, sensational divorce from her second husband, the eleventh Duke of Argyll, in 1963, causing one of the more infamous scandals of the twentieth century, that transformed her celebrity status from confirmatory to Rojek’s category of Transgressive Celebrity as outlined in chapter two.

The most damning evidence revealed condemning the duchess, not just as an adultereress but, more seriously, as a women with unnatural sexual appetites, were the contents of her diary, which detailed liaisons with a number of men (some reports suggest as many as eighty-eight) and two polaroid photographs, one of the Duchess and an unidentifiable man, whose head did not appear in the photograph, posing naked and another in which the duchess was performing oral sex on the same man. The diaries and photographs had been stolen from the Duchess’s London residence by the Duke and his daughter who had been looking for evidence of the Duchess’s infidelity to present in the divorce proceedings. The unidentified man was originally thought to be Duncan Sandys, the Minister of Defence, who became the

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subject of gossip again a few months after the Argyll divorce had concluded when the then Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan, asked Lord Denning to investigate the Profumo affair, a scandal involving John Profumo, the then Secretary of State for War, and the dancer Christine Keeler. She was rumoured to be having an affair with a Russian spy at the same time as having a relationship with Profumo. When the latter lied to parliament about his relationship with Keeler it contributed to the fall of the then Conservative government.  

Although, celebrity is usually considered to be confirmatory of society’s dominant values, Rojek maintains there is also a negative aspect of Attributed Celebrity identity that is associated with the transgression of dominant social values and morality, leading to celebrity status as a result of the notoriety. He further suggests that ‘celebrity is inherently bound up with transgression’ for several reasons, the most significant in this case being that the sexual transgressions, involving high-ranking members of society including a prince and government ministers, were sufficiently scandalous to set Margaret apart from ordinary social and moral expectations and to be ‘recognised as different’. Scandals are a universal social phenomena and can only occur when individuals or groups transgress values, norms or moral codes. They also provide a means of articulating and confirming social morals as well as an opportunity for public discussion about their relevance and value. It is therefore possible for scandals to act as a vehicle for social change and not just food for gossip. There is, of course, a great deal of variation in what, and who, is likely to create a scandal even within the confines of one society. For example, extra-marital affairs in some circles in the 1950s and 60s, when society was becoming more permissive in terms of expectations of

258 Graeme Turner, Understanding Celebrity, 22.
259 Chris Rojek, Celebrity, quoted in Graeme Turner, Understanding Celebrity, 22.
260 Chris Rojek, Celebrity, 177.
261 Ibid.
female sexual morality, may have caused no more than a raised eyebrow. However, Margaret was still bound by the moral expectations of her class and therefore any sexual transgression was automatically more ‘scandal sensitive’. This is clear in the summing up of Lord Wheatley’s 50,000 word judgement at the end of the Argyll divorce hearing in which he condemned the Duchess’s attitude to marriage as ‘immoral’, stating that she was ‘a highly sexed woman who had ceased to be satisfied with normal sexual relations and had started to indulge in disgusting sexual activities to gratify a debased sexual appetite.’

Although the Duchess had clearly transgressed the moral norms, there also appears to be evidence of a hypocritical double standard of morality reminiscent of the nineteenth-century view of adulteresses in the summing up, since none of her lovers were held accountable for their actions in this case, and she alone was judged as immoral.

Bulck and Claessens suggest that, ‘for media and audiences fascinated with celebrities’ private lives, insight into their sexual behaviour is the ultimate pleasure as it deals with the most intimate details.’ Scandals that result from sexually transgressive behaviour in the 1950s and 60s, as well as in modern times, are the dominant feature of tabloid journalism and have a tendency to raise the profile of tabloid values. In addition, they are frequently identified as evidence of moral decay as suggested by newspaper headlines during the Argyll divorce proceedings - ‘Judge describes Duchess as modern woman with no scruples,’ for example. This headline is typical of the nature of the reporting of the Argyll divorce and made the Duchess vulnerable to the ridicule and contempt that is portrayed in Powder Her Face, as expressed in the way in which the Maid and Electrician, and the other characters, treat the Duchess throughout.


Hilde Van Den Bulck and Nathalie Claessens, ‘Guess who Tiger is having Sex with now?’, 47.

Adès, Thomas, Powder Her Face, The Birmingham Contemporary Music Group conducted by Thomas Adès, LWT production for Channel Four, Digital Classics DC 10002.
There appears to be little doubt from the evidence discussed so far that the Duchess of Argyll became a familiar figure in the press, therefore fulfilling the fundamental criteria for celebrity status, both as a debutante and as a result of her scandalous divorce, as the following obituary indicates:

With her pale complexion, glaucous green eyes, and blown-back brown hair ever set for the camera’s lens, Margaret, Duchess of Argyll, was, to the media which followed her every move, as much an icon of society beauty in the 1930s, as she was a figure of scandal 30 years later.\(^{266}\)

Thus, it can be concluded that, despite Hensher’s protestations to the contrary, the Duchess does qualify for celebrity status. It is also clear from the analysis of *Powder Her Face* below that the Duchess’s identity as a transgressive celebrity appears to be an integral part of her characterisation thought the opera, expressed not only by the way in which she is portrayed, but also in the way other characters treat her. This appears to be the case even in scenes that depict events that predate the divorce when her public persona was not, arguably, transgressive, but confirmatory. For example, in scene two the Maid as Confidante and the Electrician as a Lounge Lizard are discussing Margaret’s divorce from Mr Freeling and hinting at the Duchess’s insatiable sexual appetite, as the following extract demonstrates:

Maid as Confidante: She deserves nothing

She’ll get better than him. [referring to Mr Freeling]

Watch her practise on the Duke, when he arrives.

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Electrician as Lounge Lizard: It’s more than practising.
She’ll catch him. She’s got the knack. 267

The concept of identity, as already discussed in chapter two, is a fundamental theme in the academic study of celebrity and an important aspect of the discussion of God’s Liar in the previous chapter. It is also a significant theme in the life of the Duchess, whose changing identity from confirmatory to transgressive, as discussed above, is central to the story of her life and to the impact her public image made on twentieth-century society.

Like Casken, Hensher and Adès engage with the idea of dual identity in the portrayal of the characters in Powder Her Face. Thus, their characterisation of the Duchess draws on both her public identity, the transgressive celebrity, and the private self-obsessed, aging aristocrat who is slowly going mad and for whom, initially they, 268 and arguably, the audience, have little sympathy. Yet in also depicting her as racist and homophobic, Adès and Hensher preclude empathy, and we are left with the realisation that no other major opera encourages quite such deep contempt for its characters and its world. 269 She is also the tragic operatic heroine whose promiscuity and excessive spending have brought about her downfall, just as surely as vanity and pride brought about the downfall of Father Sergius in Casken’s opera. This is expressed in the opera by the contempt shown for the Duchess by the other characters. Hensher and Adès also use them to articulate the mid-twentieth-century society’s condemnation of the Duchess for abuse of her privileged position and extensive wealth in the pursuit of an ‘immoral’ and indulgent lifestyle as expressed in Lord Wheatley’s summing up during the Argyll divorce proceedings. It also reflects a fundamental change in society’s attitude to the role of the aristocracy as figures of authority and leadership in twentieth-

268 Philip Hensher, Interview with the author.
The revelations about her private life left her vulnerable to the scandal-hungry tabloid newspapers who serve the voyeuristic obsessions of a prurient society and prompted Adès’s comment that ‘even horrible people can be tragic.’

The characterisation of the Duchess also engages with the changes and continuities in the portrayal of female sexuality in operatic heroines. Distanced by the differences in nineteenth- and twentieth-century social and moral norms from the fallen women of Casken’s opera she is nevertheless linked to them by the commonality of transgressive sexual behaviour. Like many other operatic heroines before her she is on a downward trajectory that ends with humiliation and finally by death. Hensher claims that his characterisation of the Duchess owes the greatest debt to Berg’s Lulu, which in his view is ‘an indisputable candidate for the greatest opera of the twentieth century’. His fascination with Lulu also influenced his first novel, Other Lulus (1994) completed immediately prior to Powder Her Face. Hensher’s conviction that the Duchess was, like Lulu, a femme fatale who was ‘just having fun because she was bored, and both rich and beautiful enough to entice many men into her bed’, leads him to believe that she should therefore be absolved of any guilt associated with the moral expectations of the period and the class to which she belonged. Although Lulu is, of course, a fictional character, while the Duchess in Powder Her Face based on a real person, there are parallels in the characterisations. Both the Duchess and Lulu have a seemingly insatiable appetite for sex and a blatant disregard for the socially acceptable standards of behaviour of their respective societies. However, Lulu is certainly not portrayed

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272 Philip Hensher, Interview with the author.
273 Ibid.
as a celebrity, even though, as already discussed, celebrity culture existed at the time Berg was composing his opera in the years 1929-1935. Indeed, she has arguably more in common with the fallen women of the nineteenth century than the celebrity culture of the twentieth. Thus, whilst it is possible to draw comparisons with Lulu, and to acknowledge the influence her characterisation had on Hensher’s portrayal of the Duchess, it seems as if, ultimately, the identity of the heroine of Powder Her Face remains embedded in the celebrity culture of the twentieth century.

Hensher and Adès also engage with the more complex notion of changing identity in Powder Her Face with their use of just three singers to play all the other characters in the opera. Each singer plays their main role of the Maid, Electrician and Hotel Manager but also play their characters playing other people, including a parody of the Duchess. (The Maid plays confidante, waitress, mistress, rubbernecker and journalist, the Electrician plays a parody of the Duchess, a lounge lizard, waiter, rubbernecker and delivery boy, and the hotel manager plays, laundryman, another guest, Duke and judge). Thus, they are often portraying a dual identity. For, example, in the opening scene the singer who plays the Electrician is performing as the Electrician imitating the Duchess, making her a figure of ridicule whilst at the same time portraying his primary character. Although Casken also used just one singer to play several characters, she only played one at a time. The additional advantage of having a small cast playing lots of characters with the support of a small chamber orchestra is that it gives a performance a degree of intimacy for the audience. This creates the impression they are party to the intense scrutiny the Duchess is subjected to as a transgressive celebrity, and makes them feel part of the culture of complicit, voyeuristic spectatorship facilitated and encouraged by the tabloid press that is also portrayed in Mark-Anthony Turnage’s opera Anna Nicole.
*Powder Her Face* is framed by opening and closing scenes which are both set in the 1990s in the hotel room where the Duchess lived at the end of her life before until being evicted for failing to pay the rent. These scenes frame a series of six flashbacks of significant moments in the Duchess’s life that lead up to her eviction, and also portray mid-twentieth-century society’s attitude to divorce, adultery, fame and female sexuality. Adès’s music draws on a wide range of musical influences from cabaret and tango to Berg and Stravinsky.\(^{274}\) This eclecticism is characteristic of Adès,\(^{275}\) and the pastiche of various musical influences not only serves to place the action on stage into a specific timeframe, but may also go some way to explaining why, unlike Casken, Adès is not accused of misogyny in relation to the portrayal female sexuality. As, already suggested, the lack of respect for the Duchess is evident from the opening scene of the opera in which the Maid and the Electrician (parodying the Duchess) mock and ridicule her. Her transgressive celebrity status is also immediately recognised in the words of the Electrician as Duchess:

> Let me tell you about me. Let me tell you about my
> Life as a famous beauty.
> They wrote operas about me.
> They wrote novels about me.
> They painted portraits of me that won every prize in London.
> They wrote songs about me.
> You know that song. Everyone knows that song – Love me
> Why don’t you suck me off until you can’t take any

\(^{274}\) ‘Adès’ Powder Her Face is “a Modern Classic”’.
More
I'll really ram it in your jaw
Because you practise every night fellatio
It’s a most delightful art you know.276

This scene also portrays the wealthy lifestyle of the Duchess as a member of the upper-class in twentieth-century Britain. This is expressed through reference to the Duchess’s fur coats and her perfume, *Joy*, which was created for the Parisian couturier Jean Patou by the perfumer Henri Alméras in 1931 as a reaction to the Wall Street Crash, and was one of the most expensive perfumes at the time and an item that only the wealthiest could afford.277 The Duchess’s vanity and reliance on her wealth is also made clear in this scene as is the precarious nature of this position. The transient nature of fame and fortune and the danger of relying on them is symbolically reinforced in a number of the productions of *Powder Her Face* by the use of a giant staircase on stage on which all the action takes place, and on which the Duchess continuously struggle to climb to the top, one example, being Carlos Wagner’s staging in the Linbury Theatre in London in 2008.278

Scene three portrays the marriage of the Duke and Duchess in 1936, but again is depicted from the perspective of the Duchess’s transgressive status. This is expressed through the pantomime that is acted out by the Hotel Manager as Duke, the Electrician as Priest and the Duchess in which she is seen kissing the priest, being sandwiched between the priest and the Duke and collapsed on a bed with them both. The scene ends with the Electrician as Priest kissing the Duchess violently.279 Although the Duchess’s tendency towards nymphomania was not a matter of public record at this point in her life, the device of using flashbacks as a

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278 Tim Ashley, ‘Powder Her Face’.
way of exposing her downward trajectory permits its inclusion and gives the audience a greater symbolic para-intimacy as a result, just as para-intimacy with modern celebrities is increased with greater knowledge of the intimate details of their lives. It also represents Hensher’s view that the Duchess only behaved in a way that the men in her life did with impunity, whilst she was unfairly condemned. While this is taking place the Maid as a waitress sings an aria that presents the Duchess’s wealthy lifestyle from the point of view of the ‘ordinary’ person, displaying both envy and desire. Although Hensher did not intend to portray a celebrity in his characterisation of the Duchess, the detailed description of the wedding breakfast and the comments made by the Maid about the Duchess’s lifestyle presents the audience with the sort of information tabloid papers typically write about celebrity lives. The Maid’s comments that happiness does not come from having money to waste and nothing to do all day except indulge in extravagancies. However, she also imagines herself in the Duchess’s position in the same way audiences identify with modern celebrities, and in the final words of the aria she also suggests that the audience is party to that ambition:

Maid as Waitress: Fancy purchasing a Duke
That’s what I want
That’s what you want
You’d love it.

Thus the aria encapsulates the main elements of the Duchess’s life that are characterised in the opera: wealth and sex.

It is in scene four (set in 1953) that the notorious fellatio aria is performed, which begins and ends with the singer humming. Hensher’s inspiration for this came from a desire to recreate

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280 Philip Hensher, Interview with the author.
281 Philip Hensher, Powder Her Face, Act I, Scene 3, 17.
the shock element that the notorious photographs of the Duchess performing fellatio on an unidentified man caused during her divorce.\textsuperscript{282} It was also a means of expressing Wayne Koestenbaum’s idea that ‘opera gives women a voice and a sexual statement, but only as a means of ultimately silencing them.’\textsuperscript{283} The image of the Duchess being silenced through an explicit sexual act was a powerful interpretation of this idea and also relates to the obsessional desire for knowledge of intimate details of the sexual activities of celebrities, in both the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. It was greeted with outrage at first by audience and critics alike, but is also one of the reasons Hensher cites for the continuing popularity of \textit{Powder Her Face}.\textsuperscript{284}

It is, of course, not the first opera to portray a scandalous heroine. Richard Strauss’s \textit{Salome} (1903-1905) with a libretto adapted from Oscar Wilde’s eponymous play can be credited with being among the first. \textit{Salome}, like \textit{Powder her Face}, shocked audiences and critics and was banned by the court opera in Vienna who refused to allow Mahler to programme it because of the sexual content. Even today, according to Michael Kennedy,\textsuperscript{285} the portrayal of sexual obsession causes concern in some quarters. Strauss was drawn to Wilde’s work amid a great deal of interest in the story of Salome among the artistic community in Berlin at the turn of the century. This, and the emergence of an aggressive female sexuality portrayed in plays by Strindberg and Wedekind, and in the paintings of Munch, Schiele and Klimt, informed Strauss’s characterisation. Kennedy points out that ‘\textit{Salome} and its successor \textit{Elektra} (1909) changed the face of opera and paved the way for other pathological studies such as Berg’s \textit{Wozzeck} (1922) and \textit{Lulu} (also with a libretto based on plays by Wedekind) and Shostakovitch’s \textit{Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk District} (1932).’\textsuperscript{286}

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\textsuperscript{282} Philip Hensher, Interview with the author, see also Philip Hensher, ‘Sex, Power and Polaroids’.
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\textsuperscript{286} Michael Kennedy, ‘Salome’, Programme note, 7.
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Today *Powder Her Face* captures the same sense of female sexuality out of control that is apparent in both *Salome* and *Lulu*.

The portrayal of the divorce proceedings that placed the Duchess’s private sexual exploits into the public arena despite her attempts to legally prevent the diaries and photographs entering the public domain, begin in scene five (set in 1953). Here the Maid as Mistress exerts her power over the Hotel Manager as Duke not just physically, but with her superior knowledge of the location of the Duchess’s diaries he is so keen to obtain. She is also aware of the compromising photographs and eventually reveals their whereabouts. This scene displays the hypocrisy of the Duke’s position in suing the Duchess for divorce on the grounds of adultery whilst sleeping with his mistress, and the lack of respect that the public increasingly felt for a crumbling aristocracy in a changing society following the Second World War. Although Hensher’s programme notes for the 2014 English National Opera production of *Powder Her Face* state that the opera is morally neutral, it seems that this scene, and the following one in which the court case is played out, make a social statement that is, arguably, not neutral at all but highlights a social injustice.

The English National Opera production uses staging that is set out like a press gallery in a court with the audience sat in apparent judgement. This draws them in as voyeuristic spectators just as the public and the tabloid press would be in any celebrity trial. (The trials of Michael Jackson and Rolf Harris are just two instances of more recent examples of this form of spectatorship where the press followed all the proceedings in court and then reported them in great detail to an eager public.) In such cases, and including that of the Argyll divorce, the tabloid press were instrumental in shaping the narrative of the scandal by detailed reporting of every private secret.\(^\text{287}\) For the public, Margaret’s position in society meant that her image

accrued a particular set of expectations and meanings and the scandalous revelations revealed by the press transformed her public identity and intensified the prurient nature of the audience. Although Margaret now gained a notorious image she still enjoyed the level of media exposure and celebrity status that she had enjoyed as a debutante. The opera expresses this level of interest by casting the Maid and Electrician as Rubberneckers revealing snippets of information in very short sentences. It is the Hotel Manager as the Judge who delivers the speech that condemns the Duchess and signals the beginning of her downfall. Her acknowledgement of this is symbolised by her black clothing and long black veil. In the production made for DVD the Duchess’s mental instability and encroaching madness is symbolised by the Judge delivering his speech from inside a mirror as though the Duchess was hearing voices.\textsuperscript{288} As in Lord Wheatley’s summing up, the judge in the opera also describes the Duchess as a:

\begin{quote}
Woman with no scruples, and the
Morals of a bedpost…
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
She is a woman unfit for marriage.
She is certainly a woman unfit to hold an ancient
and honourable title…
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
She is a Don Juan among women.
She is insatiable, unnatural and altogether fairly(appalling).\textsuperscript{289}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{288} Thomas Adès, \textit{Powder Her Face}, The Birmingham Contemporary Music Group Conducted by Thomas Adès, LWT production for Channel Four, Digital Classics DC 10002.

\textsuperscript{289} Philip Hensher, \textit{Powder Her Face}, Act II, Scene 6, 31.
The portrayal of the double standard of sexual morals is also depicted in this speech with the words:

I cannot express the horror at what I have discovered.
I find that the Duchess is entirely to blame for these sorry events.
I find that the Duke has no stain on his character.
I pity him for the mistake he has made, which frankly any of us might make.\textsuperscript{290}

Just as with Father Sergius in Caskan’s opera the Duchess is portrayed as the author of her own downfall, the rubbernecker, expressing the way in which tabloids can dictate the public view of a celebrity and seemingly deprive the audience of independent thought.

Maid as Rubbernecker: Did you hear –
Electrician as Rubbernecker: What he said?
Maid as Rubbernecker: Quite right.
Electrician as Rubbernecker: Old Trollop.
Maid as Rubbernecker: Did you mind?
Electrician as Rubbernecker: It’s him I feel sorry for.\textsuperscript{291}

At the end of this scene and during the interlude, flashbulbs representing the paparazzi photographers’ cameras repeatedly flash presenting further evidence of the Duchess’s celebrity status. This impression is reinforced as the Duchess is interviewed by the Maid as

\textsuperscript{290} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{291} Ibid., Act II, Scene 6, 32.
Journalist. Despite the condemnation of the judge and society her indomitable spirit, or perhaps arrogance, is evident in the words, ‘so that is all, I am judged. I do not care…I was loved before I was a Duchess, and I am a Duchess still.’ However, it also portrays the Duchess as a homophobic racist and as a result, as one reviewer commented, makes it more difficult for the audience to feel any sympathy for her. In this, she is unlike the fallen women protagonists of the nineteenth century, such as Verdi’s Violetta, who elicits sympathy from the audience. Tim Ashley even went as far as to suggest that ‘there is no other major opera that encourages such deep contempt for its characters and its world.’

The Duchess, like other operatic heroines before her, among them Lulu who was killed by Jack the Ripper is, according to Hensher, finally silenced by death at the end of *Powder Her Face*. ‘The second silencing, with a microphone being dragged round a gong and fishing reels being wound in the orchestra’, is much less contentious than the first, and much less explicit. In fact it is only suggested by the words of the Hotel Manager, ‘Your car is here. That is all, madam’, symbolically putting her into her coffin, and the Duchess’s final action at the end of the scene where she rises from the bed where she is still lying to go to the gramophone and finding no record puts the needle onto the turntable, which emits white noise. Another interpretation of these final actions would be to suggest that as the Duchess is a celebrity her death did not need to be literal; her removal from the public eye as she goes into the obscurity of a nursing home would have signalled the end of her life as a celebrity, sacrificed because she is no longer interesting, and the media industry could move on to its next victim.

292 Ibid., Act II, Scene 7, 32.
293 Tim Ashley, ‘Powder Her Face’.
294 Ibid.
295 Philip Hensher, ‘Sex, Power and Polaroids’.
296 Philip Hensher, *Powder Her Face*, Act II, Scene 8, 42.
*Powder Her Face* has much to contribute to the discourses surrounding contemporary culture, despite the insistence of the librettist that the opera does not portray the life of a woman who qualifies for the status of celebrity. The references to tabloid culture, fans, intense interest in every aspect of her public and private identity throughout her life make that clear. As one of the first operas to portray the life of a celebrity, it has set a benchmark for other composers to follow. More contentious than Gavin Bryars’ *Marilyn Forever*, it has more in common with *Salome* and *Lulu* as a portrayal of transgressive female sexuality. Nevertheless as a contribution to the discourses surrounding celebrity culture it is invaluable because it is currently the only opera to portray a transgressive mid-twentieth century celebrity, *Marilyn Forever* being the portrayal of confirmatory celebrity. The fact that Hensher does not agree with the concept of celebrity culture prior to the 1990s opens up an area of debate in relation to the exact nature of celebrity in the twentieth century and how it could and should be portrayed in opera.

The next chapter continues the examination of celebrity scandal and death, through an exploration of Turnage’s operatic incarnation of the American, Anna Nicole Smith, whose life tragically echoes the progression of her British predecessor, the Duchess of Argyll, and gives a chilling warning of the potential impact of celebrity on the individual.
Chapter 5

Life and Death of a Celebrity in Anna Nicole

Beautiful and ill-fated, Anna Nicole is a pretty standard operatic heroine. Yet Anna Nicole is so much more than the story of one woman. Sensitively written and formally daring, it is a quintessential tale of the American Dream, from glorious ascendancy through tragic downfall — and all the disgraceful moments in between.298

In this chapter Mark-Anthony Turnage’s opera Anna Nicole will be considered in the context of the framework set out in chapter two. In particular, themes of identity, emulation and spectatorship and the commercialisation of celebrity with reference to reality television will be explored. Social and cultural concerns about class, beauty, body image and the objectification of women will also be discussed. The opera will also be compared to other contemporary operas that reflect ideas and themes connected with issues surrounding celebrity culture.

Anna Nicole was commissioned by the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden in 2008 and premiered in February 2011. The libretto was written by Richard Thomas who is the co-author and composer of the award winning Jerry Springer: The Opera (2003). The idea of turning the life of the Playboy Magazine glamour model, actress and reality star, Anna Nicole Smith (1967–2007) into an opera was intended to fulfil the Royal Opera House’s brief for a work that ‘would be humorous and light-hearted and contemporary’,299 although, as this study will demonstrate, there is also a serious aspect to both this opera and to the subject matter it portrays. As with his two previous operas, Greek (1988) and The Silver Tassie

299 Mark-Anthony Turnage, Interview with the author.
(1997-1999), it also gave Turnage the opportunity to engage with social and moral issues in contemporary society. The structure of Anna Nicole was influenced by the ‘arc of Anna’s life’, from obscurity in the first few scenes to fame and celebrity status at the height of the arc in the first two scenes of act two, and finally the descent into drug addiction culminating in death in the final scene. It excludes the darker events from her less than ideal childhood in order to maintain the upbeat atmosphere in the first two thirds of the work. This accentuates the drama of the final scenes where Anna’s life falls apart and the whole mood of the opera changes.\footnote{Mark-Anthony Turnage, Interview with the author.}

The musical inspiration for Turnage’s music is not just drawn from the classical world of composers such as Berg, Stravinsky, Britten and Oliver Knussen, but also from the world of rock, blues and jazz, creating a unique and distinctive soundworld.\footnote{Ibid.} Unlike Casken, who makes use of Gregorian chant to evoke a sense of place (the monastery) and to symbolise the monk in the nineteenth-century storyline, or Adès, who uses the dance music of the 1940s and 1950s to create a sense of period in Powder Her Face, Turnage does not make reference to any popular music idioms (American, English or otherwise) of the eighties and nineties in Anna Nicole. However, a sense of place is created by incorporating jazz and blues into the score and keeping the music more tonal than anything else he had written before.\footnote{Music Theatre Wales, Programme notes for Greek, performed by Music Theatre Wales (July 2011), unpagedinated.} As one reviewer commented:

What makes this opera so exciting is that Turnage seems to have found precisely the right musical idiom for such a drama - an Americana, brashly orchestrated and violently propulsive which embraces jazz, blues, musical comedy, and lounge smooch so ingeniously and

\footnote{Mark-Anthony Turnage, Interview with the author.}
responsively as to transcend mere pastiche. It doesn’t set out to be a complex or a subtle
score, but it packs an irresistibly visceral punch.304

In addition to a Puccini-sized orchestra with various doublings, including soprano saxophone
and a wide range of percussion instruments, he also makes use of a jazz trio that included the
drummer Pete Erskine in the first performance. Turnage made Erskine’s inclusion one of the
conditions of his contract with the Royal Opera House as he believed he would ‘drive the
rhythm of the jazz’ in a way that would be exciting whilst keeping it ‘tight’.305 In order to
preserve some of the improvisational quality usually associated with jazz the parts for the trio
are skeletal, thus allowing the musicians to add to them. The ‘lightness’ needed for two thirds
of the opera comes from this use of jazz and ‘hints of Broadway’. Unusually the librettist
(who is also a composer) had some input into the rhythmic element of the music as Turnage
sought his advice on the timing of humour within the music, altering phrases by a beat or
more on the strength of that advice. All the musical elements within the piece - jazz, blues
and classical styles - are blended together rather than being discrete, and help create an
appropriate sound world whilst not resorting to pastiche. The success of this strategy is clear
from Andrew Clements’s comment:

Turnage’s music has naturally evolved and widened its stylistic reach; the chorus writing in
particular looks towards the world of musical theatre, but the way in which the various
musical elements, whether from Broadway or pop, jazz or expressionism, are woven together
in a thoroughly self-consistent and personal style that remains as effective now as it was
almost a quarter of a century ago in Greek.306

304 Mark-Anthony Turnage, ‘Composer profile’, Boosey and Hawkes Online (accessed 4 January 2014),
305 Mark-Anthony Turnage, Interview with the author.
306 Andrew Clements, ‘The Greek Legacy’, Programme for Greek, performed by Music Theatre Wales (2011),
unpaginated.
Anna Nicole Smith was born into a class of white Americans known as ‘trailer trash’, thus placing her on the social and economic margins of society in much the same way as belonging to the gypsy community did for Bizet’s Carmen, or belonging to the traveller community in Britain does today. This pejorative term refers only to white Americans and thus carries connotations of racial prejudice, since no other ethnic group is referred to in this way. It also serves to distinguish this group from all other white Americans, who are regarded as the cultural standard against which all other social groups and individuals are measured and are therefore regarded as inherently superior. The myths and stereotypes that are associated with the term ‘trailer trash’, or ‘white trash’, imply an expectation of morally unacceptable behaviour and a lack of either the desire, or ability, to function as part of mainstream society. This assumption is used in order to justify their continued marginalisation.307

Anna Nicole’s early life typified the archetypal images of ‘white trash’. She was born in Mexia, Texas on the 28th November 1967 and brought up in a single parent family, her father having left when she was a baby. She dropped out of school before completing an education that could have provided her with the skills to transform her life, and went to work in a fast food outlet – Jimmy’s Fried Chicken. At seventeen she was married to Billy Smith, who also worked at Jimmy’s, and by the age of nineteen she was a single parent herself. With a young child to support she decided to move to Houston to work as a lap-dancer in a local club for ‘gentlemen.’ Playboy and other magazines continually referred to her rise to celebrity status as a rags to riches story, implying perhaps that the only course open to her as a Southern, small-town, unwed mother was to use her body as a means to earn money.308 This continuing allusion to her roots symbolically confirms her socially undesirable status.

307 Jeffrey A. Brown, ‘The Strange Case of Anna Nicole Smith’, 76.
308 Ibid., 77.
This status could have been one of the reasons Antonio Pappano claimed that Anna Nicole is the latest in a long line of fallen women protagonists in opera, that include Verdi’s Violetta, and Bizet’s Carmen. Although this comment could be viewed as a means of attracting a traditional audience to the performance of a contemporary opera with a contentious content, he also expressed it in his BBC Four documentary, broadcast in 2011, in which he examines the way in which composers and librettist make use of female characters to ‘explore and challenge society’s attitudes and prejudices’. This idea appears to suggest either that the term ‘fallen woman’ has meaning and relevance outside of the confines of the nineteenth-century’s patriarchal society, or that opera is a discrete art form that exists outside the confines of the cultural and political society in which it was written. Since the latter is clearly not the case, otherwise opera could never fulfil the role of challenging society’s accepted norms, the term ‘fallen women’ seems to be an inappropriate description in this context, since it takes no account of the social, moral and political context of the contemporary society in which Anna lived, or of the clear evidence within the opera that she was part of the twentieth-century American celebrity culture industry. Furthermore, nineteenth-century fallen women did not come exclusively from marginalised communities, but often from the middle and upper classes where the patriarchal morals were more highly valued and any sexual transgression socially and morally unacceptable.

Mark-Anthony Turnage claims not to be a follower of celebrity culture and had not intended this aspect of Anna Nicole’s life to be the defining factor in her characterisation. Instead, having researched Anna’s story, which he believed to be a rich source of humour and tragedy and therefore an ideal subject for his new opera, his intention was to portray a traditionally tragic operatic heroine in a contemporary setting, rather than a celebrity.

\[\text{309 Antonio Pappano, *Opera’s Fallen Women*, BBC Four Documentary, first broadcast 22 April 2011 (accessed 10 January 2013), http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00zpdwq.}\]
\[\text{310 Mark-Anthony Turnage, Interview with the author.}\]
\[\text{311 Ibid.}\]
words of the chorus in the opening scene, who allude directly to Samuel Beckett’s play *Waiting for Godot* (1953) with the words, ‘when all is said and done you are born astride a grave, staring down the barrel of a gun’, express this aspect of her life and hint at what is to come. However, an exploration of the opera makes it clear that the whole work is imbued with the themes and identities associated with the celebrity culture industry, and that, as the discussion below will demonstrate, Anna is the embodiment of a contemporary celebrity and of Rojek’s category of Attained Celebrity status as discussed in chapter two of this study. In addition, whilst the circumstances of Anna’s death at a young age are tragic and portrayed with all the drama associated with the deaths of other operatic heroines, such as Violetta and Carmen, this is only part of the way in which she is represented in this opera. The overwhelming evidence suggests that she is a celebrity first and foremost, albeit one who meets a tragic end, and this is the primary feature of her characterisation.

At The Royal Opera House production of the premiere in 2011, and at their more recent performance in September 2014, Anna’s celebrity status is confirmed even before the singers come on stage. Pictures of the soprano Eva-Maria Westbroek in her role as Anna Nicole posing in images that are reminiscent of the photographs of Marilyn Monroe in *Playboy Magazine* line the walls leading up to the theatre. This exposure, both symbolic and real, is evidence of Anna’s place within the celebrity industry and identifies her with the image of Marilyn Monroe. In the theatre the red velvet curtains with the embossed gold letters E II R that are usually drawn across the stage were replaced with cerise curtains embossed with the letters AR, for Anna Regina (queen of the opera stage) in gold, and the pelmet had her image in a circle with a crown over it flanked with two body builders flexing their muscles, one wearing a gold crown and the other a gold unicorn’s horn in place of the usual lion and unicorn. Pictures of Eva-Maria Westbroek’s face in the role of Anna were also hung around the auditorium. All of this is symbolic of her identity as the queen of celebrity
and leaves the audience in no doubt about her status. The staging and props throughout the opera continue in the same vein and seem to be designed to create the glitzy, extravagant setting associated with celebrity events such as the premieres of new films or the Oscar award ceremonies. The use of a giant gold throne for Anna to sit on, bright, garish colours for the scenery and a Cinderella style coach adorned with a giant white heart made of flowers for the wedding scene all added to this impression. This approach is also humorous and mocks the very shallowness of the celebrity culture with which it engages.

The opera opens by introducing Anna as fabulous and eccentric and outlines her story. Again, there is no question of her celebrity status here as the chorus rhythmically chant her name over and over culminating with ‘she rose and she soared to global fame, every man woman and woman man knew her, reviled, admired, pitied and adored…tabloid queen.’

The score suggests that the chorus in this scene should be made up of characters that represent the whole of American society, for example, members of the paparazzi, drag queens, Marilyn Monroe look-a-likes, gospel singers, rappers, lap-dancers, women in burqas, wheel-chair users, George Bush and Larry King. They also symbolise Anna’s audience. Without their desire to indulge in spectatorship her fame would not exist so they are an important representation of the power of the audience in celebrity culture. However, in both productions in The Royal Opera House they were portrayed as members of the press and television media dressed in business suits and carrying microphones. They use these to ‘interview’ Anna and the other characters whenever they sing, getting closer and closer to the action as the opera progresses. This dramatic symbolism of the intrusive nature of the media industry begins in Act I and continues throughout the rest of the opera. Media exposure of intimate details of the life of an individual is one of the defining feature of celebrity status in

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contemporary society, as discussed in chapter two. Thus their consistent presence in the opera is further evidence of Anna’s celebrity status.

In scene two Anna is shown working at the fast food outlet - Jimmy’s in the town where she was born and grew up. She wants to leave and make her mark in the world and this decision marks the beginning of her quest to be the next Marilyn Monroe. As already discussed in chapter two one of the dominant aspects of modern celebrity culture is the idea that anyone can become famous. The images of celebrities in magazines and on television and the revelations about the intimate details of their lives create a para-intimacy that also encourages this. Anna’s ambition was to emulate Monroe, a desire that grew as a result of seeing her image as a Playboy model and star. Identification with this image encouraged Anna to get out of the town where she was born. However, the reality does not always match the expectation, as was the case with Marilyn Monroe, whose unhappiness with the stardom she aspired to contributed to the tragic side of her image.\(^\text{314}\)

As with Marilyn Monroe, Anna’s body image was to become a central aspect of her identity first as a lap-dancer and then as a glamour model, actress and reality television star. The concept of beauty as a means of defining identity is a significant issue in the discourse surrounding celebrity culture, as Jeffrey A. Brown points out, ‘cultural concern about race, class and beauty often intersect with mass-mediated depictions of the female body.’\(^\text{315}\) In Western culture beauty is treated as a virtue and, despite the changing ideas about what makes an ideal female body, the cultivation of appearance is an important aspect of celebrity image in the twentieth century as well as a very visible example of what Brown refers to as ‘tyrannical normalising practice’.\(^\text{316}\) In addition, empirical studies have shown that beauty is associated with a range of positive social and cognitive characteristics that suggest an


\(^{315}\) Jeffrey A. Brown, ‘The Strange Case of Anna Nicole Smith’, 74.

\(^{316}\) Ibid, 78.
attractive person is happier, more successful and generally more popular. Therefore, women, particularly those constantly in the limelight, consider time, money and even pain as a worthwhile investment in the pursuit of the perfect body image. Anna’s breast implants for example caused her pain for the rest of her life; indeed, during her post-mortem autopsy it was discovered that her implants contained 700ccs of silicone (nearly the equivalent volume of liquid found in a bottle of wine) and her blood showed the presence of nine prescription drugs. Feminists view the preoccupation with appearance as a manifestation of the struggle for power either between the sexes or between women of different social and cultural backgrounds, and regard women as the ‘victims of both beauty and the ideologies of feminine inferiority which produce and maintain practices of body maintenance and improvement.’

Studies in the field of psychology have also demonstrated that beauty is linked to preferential treatment in the job market. In Anna Nicole Smith’s case the financial power of the male clients in the club where she was employed and their perception that larger breasts are a sign of attractiveness acted as the incentive for Anna to have breast implants in order to enhance her body image. This is portrayed in Turnage’s opera in Act I, scene 5, where Anna dances using a pole placed in the centre of the stage, symbolising her elevated position among the dancers, gained as a result of her surgery. The consequent jealousy her fellow dancers have for her preferential treatment is also portrayed.

Chorus: Four months later she looked fabulous

We’re not jealous

318 Peter Osin, ‘Big and Beautiful’ in: The Royal Opera House Programme for Anna Nicole (The Royal Opera House, September 2014), 30.
320 Jeffrey A. Brown, ‘The Strange Case of Anna Nicole Smith’, 74.
She hooks the richer clientele
I hope the bitch burns in hell.

We’re not jealous.
We couldn’t be happier.
We’re not jealous
We’re fucking furious.\(^{322}\)

In 1992, still harbouring ambitions to become a model with a body image like Marilyn Monroe, Anna sent photographs of herself naked to *Playboy Magazine* who immediately accepted her as a model. Her new curvy figure having the right look, according to Brown, to ‘represent a particularly sexy version of the bourgeois female body’,\(^ {323}\) she also modelled for Guess Jeans in the same year, who featured her in what Brown describes as ‘seductive poses reminiscent of classical era Hollywood glamour photography.’\(^ {324}\) These images of ‘perfection’ not only identified her with her heroine Marilyn Monroe, and thus the celebrity culture, but also with ideal images of middle-class American women. In 1993 she was named playmate of the year by *Playboy Magazine*. The success and the publicity surrounding her sexy image gave her high visibility in the public sphere. Tabloids and celebrity magazines published articles and numerous photographs of her, thereby confirming her status as a celebrity. It was these images that led to offers of film parts and Anna made her debut in a small role in *The Hudsucker Proxy* (1994). This was followed by a starring role

\(^{322}\) Mark-Anthony Turnage, *Anna Nicole*, Royal Opera House Chorus and Orchestra, directed by Richard Jones, conducted by Antonio Pappano, Opus Arte, 2011, OA 1054 D. Words taken from subtitles on the DVD, as the libretto is unavailable as a separate publication and the shortened score online is incomplete.


\(^{324}\) Ibid.
as Tanya Peters in *Naked Gun 33: the Final Insult* (1994). Her biggest role was in the unsuccessful film *To the Limit* (1995).

In 1994 Anna became the subject of media gossip and scandal when she married her second husband, the billionaire oil tycoon J. Harold Marshall II, who was sixty-three years her senior and whom she met in the lap-dancing club where she was a dancer. Like Monroe, she used her sex appeal to attract and marry high-profile, powerful men. Their marriage attracted ever increasing media attention and suggestions that she was a ‘simple-minded seductress’ who had married for money. This marriage concludes the final scene of the first act in the opera, where Anna and Marshall, both dressed in white, are joined by Anna’s son Daniel on the Cinderella style coach. Daniel hands her some pills; this is his sole function as a child and represents the transgressive aspect of Anna’s characterisation, both in her use of drugs and in her willingness to expose Daniel to them. It also hints at the downfall and tragedy that will come in the final scenes of act two. Although this is another episode that may have led Pappano to include her among the fallen operatic heroines of the past, this event is not what defines her. As is already clear from the discussion above, she is not portrayed primarily as a temptress as the fallen women in Casken’s opera are, or as a serial seductresses like Lulu. Instead her identity clearly lies within the framework of ideas associated with celebrity status and the trappings and temptations of fame.

It is at this point in the opera that the members of the ever-present press are joined by a more sinister representation of the paparazzi in the form of dancers dressed as black television cameras. There is only one in the marriage scene but from this point their numbers increase as the opera progresses, moving about the stage like stalking predators or hiding in corners until in the final scenes they become an all dominating, menacing, intrusive presence.

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325 ‘Anna Nicole Smith Factfile’, 15.
326 Jeffrey A. Brown, ‘The Strange Case of Anna Nicole Smith’, 91.
They film Anna on the toilet, giving birth; they get ever closer until in the final scenes they film Anna dying and crowd round her, feeding her pills as they do so, before helping her into a body bag and zipping it up. This symbolic destruction creates the same kind of image of the paparazzi that emerged during the life-time of Diana, Princess of Wales, particularly in the days following her death. It also symbolises the audience’s voyeuristic spectatorship of celebrities whose interest in the intimate details of their lives makes them morally responsible for the actions of the press.

In the opening scene of the second act Anna explains to her lawyer Stern what it feels like to be famous and to become a celebrity just as her heroine Marilyn Monroe:

Anna: A Jimmy Choo shoe
     on a red carpet.
     This is how it feels,
     can you feel it?
     This is the sound of fame.327

This and the party scene immediately following represent the high point in Anna’s life and the arc-shaped structure of the opera where she enjoys all the advantages of fame and fortune. Her identity is still associated with a desirable body image and she has more money than she could ever need. The disco ball, bright lights and a real jazz band on stage all symbolise the riches of a successful celebrity lifestyle and once again confirm her celebrity status.

However, this scene also represents the transient nature of the trappings of fame and fortune with Marshall’s death during the party and his removal from the stage in a gold body bag. When Marshall died a little over a year after their marriage without leaving any provision in his will for Anna she initiated legal proceedings to gain a share of his estate, which the family contested. The case caused a scandal in the press and a battle in the courts that reached as far as the U.S. Supreme Court and is indeed still ongoing. For this reason Turnage and Thomas

327 Mark-Anthony Turnage, Anna Nicole, DVD, Act II, Scene 1.
removed the planned court scene from their opera on legal advice in order to protect themselves, and the Royal Opera House, from litigation, and lawyers were present during the final rehearsals in order to make sure that nothing in the performance would result in legal proceedings. This is also the reason the libretto was not published as a separate document.  

Brown suggests that the proceeding presented Anna’s legal rights as a public trial of the appropriateness of her sexual relations with a man so much older than herself, which became not merely a legal issue but also one of cultural acceptability. Whilst the marriage was legal and Anna’s challenge to the will not unreasonable in normal circumstances nevertheless their relationship challenged American ideas about acceptable norms of behaviour. According to Brown, the legality of the will was of less interest to the press that the question of whether or not Anna ‘looked she deserved to be one of the richest women in the country’, illustrating once again that Anna’s body image was not just a question of aesthetics but also, more fundamentally, a matter of ideas about class.

The fame and notoriety generated by the court case increased Anna’s public visibility. Press interest in her continued to intensify, resulting in many more articles and photographs of her appearing in the tabloid press and in celebrity gossip magazines. Just as with the Duchess of Argyll, Anna’s celebrity status changed from confirmatory to transgressive as a result of scandal. However, unlike the Duchess whose transgressive behaviour was compounded by her social position and the possible identity of the headless lover, Anna was, arguably, behaving in a way that was consistent with her identity as a member of the marginal ‘trailer trash’ community. Although these events could be used by Pappano as evidence for his view that Anna is a fallen women, her high visibility in the public arena suggests this is not the case. Fallen women in the nineteenth century were more likely to hide

328 Mark-Anthony Turnage, Interview with the author.
329 Jeffrey A. Brown, ‘The Strange Case of Anna Nicole Smith’, 78.
330 Ibid.
their status than to advertise it. The shame attached to their behaviour often causing them to be ostracised from society, a situation that is portrayed in Augustus Egg’s triptych, *Past and Present*.

Turnage and Thomas address the issue of socially acceptable behaviour and the dangers of fame and celebrity through the portrayal of Anna’s mother, Vergie. She acts as a narrator throughout the opera commenting on Anna’s actions and cautioning her when she makes choices that are contrary to socially acceptable norms. Thus, her words represent not just the concerns of a mother, but also the voice of American society. This is balanced by Thomas and Turner, who also use Vergie to question the actions of the other characters, and thereby highlighting their culpability for the tragic consequences of Anna’s choices. This is another instance that demonstrates how Anna is not portrayed as a fallen woman who must therefore be solely responsible for the violation of social norms. The question of culpability is particularly relevant in relation to the actions of Anna’s lawyer, Howard K. Sterne, who was implicated in Anna’s death, as several of the prescription drugs found in her blood during autopsy investigations were prescribed for him. He was subsequently charged for his alleged part in providing controlled substances to Anna. He was found guilty in 2010, but won an appeal in 2011.

The musical interlude following Marshall’s death in act two, scene ten marks the turning point in the opera and the beginning of her descent and self-destruction. During the interlude a screen depicting a portrait of Anna on a background slowly fills with beef burgers, and a list of dates is used to indicate that ten years have passed. During this time Anna put on weight changing her body image from something that represented upper and middle-class values to what Brown describes as a transgressive body based on the ideas of the female grotesque. This image is the opposite of the classic body in both appearance and ideology and
is associated with lower class values and morals\textsuperscript{331} in the mind of American society. In Anna’s case her refusal to stop wearing skimpy clothes that had once accentuated her ideal body made her a figure of ridicule, and her modelling and acting opportunities almost disappeared as a result. As a celebrity who gained weight in the public eye Anna became a threat to accepted social standards and was actively and openly censored as a result.\textsuperscript{332} The media and public outrage was arguably compounded by the idea that a woman who had, according to Brown, ‘embodied the ideal beauty image had allowed herself to gain weight and therefore effectively satirised her own image.’\textsuperscript{333} The intense pressure of the media scrutiny and public criticism contributed to Anna’s growing reliance on drugs and alcohol that resulted in the unpredictable behaviour society associated with her white trailer trash roots. The media then started to spread stories of her as talentless and doomed.\textsuperscript{334} Act two, scene eleven comes directly after the musical interlude and focuses on Anna’s weight gain and erratic behaviour. Anna screams at Sterne to give her more drugs, to which he reluctantly accedes. He also illustrates the media condemnation of her behaviour by pointing out that she has become a public relations disaster.

The last four scenes of the opera chart Anna’s career as a reality television celebrity. Although it gave her the exposure and attention for which she longed, it also came at the cost of both her privacy and dignity, as these lines in Turnage’s opera, sung by Anna’s lawyer, Harold Stern portray:

\begin{quote}
We’ll sell your face, your ass, 
your weight, your voice.  
We’ll sell your joys and sorrows.  
We’ll sell your todays and tomorrows. 
What else you got
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{331} Ibid., 81.  
\textsuperscript{332} Ibid., 82.  
\textsuperscript{333} Ibid.  
As discussed in chapter two, the desire for celebrity status is one of the driving forces behind the increasing popularity of reality television programmes. Hitherto unknown, ordinary individuals can become celebrities overnight, but it is also a way for established celebrities to gain more exposure and thus raise their visibility and maintain their celebrity status. Recent examples include the singer, Peter Andre and the Osbournes. Television celebrity is configured around conceptions of familiarity and mass acceptability thus promoting para-social relationships as intimate details of the lives of celebrities are exposed and analysed. For the audience reality television provides an opportunity for voyeuristic spectatorship and a medium through which to analyse and discuss social and morally acceptable norms of behaviour. The Anna Nicole Show is a good example. It was first aired in August 2002 and achieved the highest ever rating for a reality programme despite the distain of the critics who disliked its focus on Anna’s apparent social failings. The show ran for two years and was then taken off air due to falling viewing figures. During that time all the intimate details of Anna’s life, including her body image, choice of furniture, eating habits, weight gain and drug and alcohol dependency, were on full public view and treated with scorn. The weight gain was of particular significance according to Jeffrey Brown, since celebrity status implies that the body is public property and therefore open to censure. The media reflected the public outrage at her desecration of her public image as sex goddess and heavily criticised what they perceived as lazy self-indulgence. Stories of her early life and poor background were cited as reasons for her inability to prevent the downward spiral into alcohol and drug addiction that placed her back in the margins of civilised society. She was also held up as

335 Mark-Anthony Turnage, Anna Nicole, DVD, Act II.
337 Jeffrey A. Brown, ‘The Strange Case of Anna Nicole Smith’, 82.
338 Ibid., 83.
an example of why someone from her class in society should not have money, thus seemingly supporting Marshall’s family in the ongoing court battle for his estate.339

Vergie’s aria final aria in Act two of the opera, is a cautionary tale summing up her daughter’s life and the dangers of the temptations of fame, which can turn the pursuit of celebrity status into tragedy:

Vergie: You can pray, you can dream.
You can wish, you can try.
Just another way of saying
that shit happens and you die.

Don’t believe everything you read
don’t believe everything you hear.
Just pray it don’t happen to you
and keep your loved ones near.

Oh my Anna, my Anna!
My flesh, my blood
My embarrassment.340

Her words also articulate the ‘widespread scorn and derision directed at celebrities that is aimed predominantly at a particular kind of female celebrity, of which Anna is an example. This celebrity is either an ordinary girl whose fame is a result of appearances on reality television shows, or a star who has been on a drug or alcohol-fuelled course to self-

339 Ibid., 93.
340 Turnage, Mark-Anthony, Anna Nicole, DVD, Act II.
Williamson suggests that ‘the gendered politics of the treatment of these celebrities masks a deeper class prejudice that has emerged in Anglo-American culture in recent times that is concealed behind a mask, of sexism.’ Since it is the public demand for intimate details of the lives of celebrities, including photographs of the most personal moments in their lives there appears to be evidence here of a deep-seated hypocrisy within society with the ‘ordinary’ celebrity as the victim. In Anna’s case the intrusive photographs included her lying dead covered in vomit following her drug overdose. Diana, Princess of Wales, although not an ordinary girl, was also subjected to the same lack of respect in the interests of celebrity news when she was photographed in the moments following the car crash in Paris that killed her. The demand for images of celebrities at their most vulnerable raises the question of whether society should accept some responsibility for the consequences of press intrusion. The soprano Eva-Maria Westbroek suggests that Anna Nicole acts as ‘a big mirror for all of us because we are all part of this violation of privacy.’ It could be argued that as a society we forfeit moral authority when we condone the institutionalised abuse of celebrities. Anna Nicole also functions as a modern-day parable that raising awareness of the dangers of giving into the temptations of the fame and fortune offered by the celebrity industry, a message that Casken also portrays in God’s Liar as discussed in chapter three.

The final scenes are much darker in tone than the rest of the opera and mark the final descent to the self-destruction that completes the arc-shaped structure of the work. Sterne now treats Anna with contempt, mirroring society’s attitude to her now she has transgressed accepted social codes of behaviour. He is also portrayed as being in complete control of her life and intent on making as much money from her transgressive identity as he can. This is

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341 Milly Williamson, ‘Female Celebrities and the Media’, 118.
342 Ibid.
343 Mark-Anthony Turnage, Anna Nicole, Royal Opera House Chorus and Orchestra, directed by Richard Jones, conducted by Antonio Pappano, Opus Arte, 2011, OA 1054 D, production insights. See also, ‘Behind the Scenes at Anna Nicole’ (The Royal Opera House), YouTube (accessed 8 June 2015), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fVBH7-sCCwI.
demonstrated in scene fourteen, when he sell the rights to watch Anna give birth to her child. The numbers of ever-present anthropomorphised cameras increases significantly, symbolising the voyeuristic nature of the audience’s interest in the events being played out. In the final two scenes Anna Nicole becomes like other operatic women before her, a tragic heroine. Her beloved son, Daniel dies of a drug overdose, poignantly remaining on stage wrapped up in a body bag from which he sings the only words he utters throughout the whole opera – an aria listing all the drugs that killed him. In the final scene Anna loses the will to live and she too dies while her mother weeps, the representative of all mothers who lose their children to drug and alcohol addiction.\footnote{The Royal Opera House, Programme for Anna Nicole (The Royal Opera House, September 2014), 13.}

To some extent these final scenes justify Turnage’s position that Anna is a tragic operatic heroine whose descent has parallels in the portrayal of Violetta, Carmen and Madame Butterfly. However, this does not distract from the overwhelming evidence explored as part of the discussion in this chapter that indicates she is primarily portrayed as a celebrity, as the quotation from the following review testifies this is how she comes across to an audience.

The world of opera is no stranger to tragedy and drama but never before has a controversial Playboy pin-up been the star of the show. The Royal Opera House's latest offering is a biography of the life and death of the glamour model Anna Nicole Smith. It is perhaps the opera company's most daring production yet at Covent Garden, as it explores the themes of drug addiction, money and fame.\footnote{Kate Higgins, It’s Larger than Life, but is it Opera? (accessed March 2014), http://news.sky.com/story/837763/its-larger-than-life-but-is-it-opera.}

It is clear from this review that the writer identifies Anna Nicole’s heroine as a contemporary
celebrity and the opera as a reflection of twenty-first century society. However, some reviewers imply that she is a fallen woman, just as the heroines of the nineteenth century were, thus supporting Pappano’s position, despite the compelling evidence to the contrary as discussed already in this chapter. For example, Peter Conrad, writing in The Guardian, stated that:

Opera already has plenty of hoydens and harlots like Anna Nicole Smith. The heroines of Verdi’s La traviata, Puccini’s Manon Lescaut and Massenet’s Thaïs are courtesans, and Strauss’s Salome performs a striptease without needing the pole around which Anna Nicole's legs twined themselves when she cavorted at the club in Houston.346

The Royal Opera House’s commissioning body had some initial concerns about how the sensationalist tone of the opera, and the sordid nature of some of the episodes in the life of Anna Nicole Smith might sit with their tradition audience base. In addition, Richard Thomas was well known for using colourful language in his work and there were concerns that this may also cause offense. Following a performance of Anna Nicole, one reviewer commented that:

Thomas has a gift for unrefined, sometimes disgusting language that really cuts to the bone. There is no purple prose in this opera, and the easily offended might want to stay away, although they would be missing out on a real operatic spectacle with a uniquely American subject.347

In order to deal with this issue The Royal Opera House sent letters to all their subscribers with the advance publicity for Anna Nicole warning them that they may find the content

347 Zachary Stewart, Anna Nicole.
offensive. This had the result of changing the nature of the audience for the first performance to one that was more eclectic than usual and in the composer’s words was ‘a very lively, quite gay audience.’\textsuperscript{348} It is of course possible that in addition to any genuine concern about causing offense, this was also an opportunity to attract a wider audience who may already be interested in celebrity culture, but would not necessarily associate it with classical opera. There would also have been the opportunity of gaining free publicity once the papers were made aware of the potential controversy and raising the profile of both the opera and the Royal Opera House. As Peter Conrad of \textit{The Guardian} suggests, ‘The Royal Opera is expecting and probably counting on a fuss, but no one should dispute Turnage's choice of subject. The gaudily uninhibited Anna Nicole belongs in opera.’\textsuperscript{349}

It is clear from the reviews and from the exploration of the life of Anna Nicole that the portrayal of her life story was always likely to have the potential to cause controversy. However, the opera also raises some serious social issues relating to the treatment of women who become objectified by the celebrity industry, and used as a product to be discarded once they no longer reap financial rewards. There are also social messages about the destruction caused by the use of drugs, a topic that particularly resonated with the composer since his own brother died of a drug overdose.

The contribution this opera makes to the discourses surrounding the themes and theories of celebrity culture is invaluable, as it is the only contemporary opera to portray an Attained Celebrity who has come from a marginalised part of society and achieved what many people dream of doing in terms of fame and recognition. Anna Nicole also embodies the shallow, controversial side of celebrity that is often regarded with suspicion and derision. In portraying this element Turnage provides a point of reference for the academic study of

\textsuperscript{348} Mark-Anthony Turnage, Interview with the author.  
\textsuperscript{349} Peter Conrad, \textit{Anna Nicole}.  

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this aspect of celebrity culture studies. The opera also engages with the themes of identity, identification and emulation as well as the voyeuristic nature of audience spectatorship, particularly in relation to the contemporary obsession with reality television. In creating an opera with such a controversial subject matter, Turnage and Thomas have contributed significantly to the discourses surrounding the dissemination of celebrity culture through the medium of opera.
Chapter 6

Conclusion: Aspects of Celebrity Culture in Contemporary Opera

The aim of this research has been to consider the contribution the study of contemporary opera makes to the discourses surrounding the academic study of celebrity culture, and to explore how and to what extent its theories and themes are reflected in three contemporary British operas: John Casken’s *God’s Liar*, Thomas Adès’ *Powder her Face* and Mark-Anthony Turnage’s *Anna Nicole*. In addition, the extent to which each of these operas reflect the social and cultural mores of the period in which they were set has also been considered. Finally, the audience reaction to the subject matter of each opera and the manner in which it is portrayed has been discussed with a view to understanding the influence these operas have on the continuing and developing discourses relating to celebrity, as well as opera’s ability to act generally as an effective vehicle for the dissemination of ideas relating to celebrity culture.

The analysis in chapter two of current themes and theories relating to the academic study of celebrity culture provided the framework for the discussion of the contemporary operas in the following chapters. It is clear from the evidence presented in that chapter that some academics, such as Robert Garland, believe the beginnings of celebrity culture date back as far as the ancient Greeks and was certainly present in the time of Alexander the Great. The evidence shows that Alexander was greatly admired during his lifetime and is still acknowledged as one of the greatest military leaders of all time to this day.\(^{350}\) There is also evidence that intimate details of his personal life entered the public domain, and images of him appeared on coins and in the form statues so that he became highly visible in the public

sphere. All of these features are essential elements of modern celebrity. However, it was the invention of the printing press and the consequent proliferation of print media from the end of the eighteenth century, together with the introduction of tabloid journalism instigated by the newspaper editor William Stead, that really marks the beginning of celebrity culture in its contemporary form. Print media also played, and continues to play, a crucial role in promoting individuals and sustaining their public profiles, thus providing a means of creating and sustaining celebrity status. As the exploration of the contention that Lord Byron enjoyed celebrity status made clear, celebrity culture is not merely a construct of the late twentieth century, and thus Hensher’s proposition that the Duchess of Argyll is not a celebrity can be refuted. Equally, Pappano’s suggestion that Anna Nicole is the latest in a long line of fallen women protagonists cannot be sustained. As the evidence in chapters four and five suggest both of these figures are clearly celebrities and therefore an analysis of their portrayal in the operas of Thomas Adès and Mark-Anthony Turnage respectively makes a valuable contribution to the discourses surrounding the academic study of celebrity culture.

All of the operas explored during the course of this study engage with the theme of identity that is central to the theory of celebrity culture, as discussed in chapter two; however, they do this in very different ways. The idea put forward in God’s Liar that the identity of celebrities such as Marilyn Monroe can be viewed as modern-day equivalents of the nineteenth-century fallen women in the context of their role as seductresses, is unique, both in terms of this study and in relation to any other contemporary opera. Neither Turnage and Thomas nor Adès and Hensher engage in any form of comparison in relation to cultural and moral norms outside the period of their operas. Both Casken and Turnage generate meaning from the iconic identity of Marilyn Monroe. Casken uses her in a fictional context as the inspiration for his characterisation of the Star in the contemporary aspect of his libretto, whereas in Anna Nicole she is integral to the characterisation of Anna, who aspired to be like
her, and the inspiration for the images of Eva-Maria Westbroek that adorned The Royal Opera House during their productions of the opera. Gavin Bryars takes this further with his portrayal of Monroe by making her the central character in his opera *Marilyn Forever*.

The identity and character development of each of the celebrity protagonists in the operas by Casken, Adès and Turnage conform to Rojek’s categorisations of Attributed, Achieved, Ascribed and Transgressive celebrity and thereby provide relevant examples of operatic heroines that can be used in the discourses relating to music and celebrity culture, providing further research material for an increasingly interdisciplinary academic field. Both *Powder Her Face* and *Anna Nicole* demonstrate the validity of Rojek’s theory that the nature of celebrity is not merely confirmatory of social and culture norms in relation to female sexuality, but can also develop into something transgressive. Casken also attempts to engage with this in his characterisation of the Star in order to draw comparisons between her and the nineteenth-century fallen women of Tolstoy’s novella. However, unlike either the Duchess of Argyll or Anna Nicole, the Star’s behaviour does not transgress any social or cultural norms in her role as part of the film industry and therefore she cannot be categorised as transgressive. She, like other actors and film stars belong to a sub-group of Achieved Celebrity. Both Anna Nicole Smith and Margaret, Duchess of Argyll are initially Attributed celebrities before becoming Transgressive, however because of the flashback device used by Hensher and Adès to portray their protagonist, the characterisation of the Duchess is consistently seen as transgressive throughout the opera. Anna Nicole, however, retains her Attributed Celebrity status until her changed body image transforms it to transgressive. Society’s reaction to the death of an Ascribed Celebrity is portrayed in Jonathan Dove’s *When She Died… Death of a Princess*, which is set in the aftermath of the fatal accident that killed Diana, Princess of Wales.

The defining element that confirms an individual’s celebrity status, regardless of their
categorisation, is largely reliant on the extent to which they are visible in the public arena through the medium of the media. Each of the three operas engage with this aspect of celebrity culture. In the case of the Duchess of Argyll, the extent to which the intimate details of her sexual exploits were exposed and discussed in the tabloid press confirmed her identity as the transgressive celebrity of Adès’s opera. This is expressed in *Powder Her Face* in several interconnecting ways, first through the speech given by the judge in scene six and secondly through the words and actions of the other characters in the opera who refer to rumours of her exploits that were published in the tabloids and, more subtly through their attitude to her, which reflects their knowledge of her transgressions. It can also be seen in the use of newspaper headlines stuck into a scrapbook that is one of the props used in the televised production. As a more recent celebrity, Anna Nicole’s identity is not only promoted and maintained through the printed word in newspapers and magazines, as the Duchess’s was, but it was also confirmed and enhanced through exposure on films and television. This aspect of celebrity culture is embodied in every aspect of Turnage’s opera, portrayed dramatically and convincingly through the characterisation of members of the chorus who take on the roles of members of the press, and through the increasingly menacing anthropomorphized cameras representing the paparazzi. Casken’s portrayal of this aspect of celebrity culture is more implied than explicit. The Star’s exposé in the media is assumed to come as a result of her sexually explicit portrayal of Makovkina, but there is also the implication that this also exposes Stephen to the less than welcome attention of the press.

Identification and emulation are also major themes within the framework of celebrity culture and there is evidence of their inclusion in each of the three chosen operas. The Star in *God’s Liar* had, as already discussed, been modelled on Marilyn Monroe and her image as a sexual icon of the 1950s. Identifying with Monroe’s persona and being able to emulate her was an integral part of the singer’s role in portraying the Star on stage. Anna Nicole also
identified strongly with Monroe and emulating her was the impetus that informed her career as a celebrity. However, although other people identifying with Margaret before she became a Duchess was a feature of her life, this is not portrayed in *Powder Her Face*.

All the operas portray ideas relating to the social, cultural and political mores of the periods in history they depict, particularly, but not exclusively, relating to ideas about accepted feminine sexual norms. The subjection of women in the patriarchal society of nineteenth-century Russia, and the resulting fallen status of the female protagonists, are expressed in the characterisation of Marie, Makolvkina and the Merchant’s Daughter in *God’s Liar*. Both *God’s Liar* and *Powder Her Face* portray a hypocritical double standard of associated with sexual culpability, despite the twentieth-century context of Adès’s work and, arguably, the modern equivalent, the objectification of women, is featured in the portrayal of Anna Nicole in relation to her body image is in Turnage’s work.

The idea of spectatorship is complex in opera as it can relate both to the audiences that attend the operas and to the characters within the operas who are the audience that watch the main protagonist. This is an aspect of both *Powder Her Face* and *Anna Nicole*. The audience and characters in Adès’s opera are involved in the type of voyeuristic spectatorship that tends to accompany scandal, which is very different from other categories of spectatorship that are expressions of devotion, adoration and worship. Voyeurism is also an aspect of audience participation in *Anna Nicole*, both in relation to her lap-dancing activities and her television career, but is also the nature of all the representation of press and paparazzi throughout the opera. An aspect of both these operas is the audience’s complicit voyeurism as they watch the sensationalist portrayal of celebrity culture in the opera house. However, this is not portrayed as part of audience participation in celebrity in *God’s Liar* and this may have something to do with the nature of his subject matter. Both Adès and Turnage engaged with

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sensation and shock in the choice of subject matter for their operas. Hensher had even started from the premise that he wanted to shock the audience with the first ‘blow job’ ever to be performed on the opera stage.⁵⁵² There is also an inherent sensational element in the notoriety of the Duchess and the scandal caused by her divorce. The events of Anna Nicole’s life and her tragic death also lend themselves to a sensationalist approach as does the glitz and glamour associated with American celebrity culture. Although Casken portrays seductresses in the nineteenth-century element of his opera, they no longer have the power to shock a modern audience and the Star’s part is too small within the context of the opera to cause a sensation. There is of course an inherent danger in portraying the life of a real person whose actions and character are open to interpretation as it is possible to cause offense to those that knew them, or those that might have a different have view as to the way in which they should be treated in the context of an opera. This was one of the risks in portraying the life of Anna Nicole, particularly in light of the ongoing court battle. It was also a risk in portraying the Duchess of Argyll, but primarily because of the way in which Hensher and Adès decided to depict her sexual activities. However, the portrayal of fictional characters is not without its dangers as Casken discovered when portraying nineteenth-century fallen women in a way that remained faithful to Tolstoy’s characterisation.

It is clear that in every case the role of the media in creating and promoting celebrity status is vital, and this is evident in the portrayal of each of the celebrities in the three operas analysed, as part of this study as well as the other contemporary operas referred to. Without a high level of exposure provided by the media industry celebrities quickly become marginalised, as the Duchess of Argyll was towards the end of her life when the press were no longer as interested in her activities. The media also plays a vital role in the dissemination of celebrity culture and is equally important in the promotion of contemporary opera,

³⁵² Philip Hensher, Interview with the author.
through, for example, published reviews of performances, biographies of composers and singers, articles and photographs as well as the dissemination of performances on CDs, DVDs and on the internet. It is also clear that the media can be instrumental in the downfall of a celebrity through obsessive and intrusive exposure as in the case of Diana, Princess of Wales and Anna Nicole.

Opera is currently enjoying high audience numbers. An increasingly diverse audience who still attend performances of new and established opera provide another means of encouraging discussions about the portrayal of celebrity culture. *God’s Liar, Anna Nicole* and *Powder Her Face* have all received repeated performances to large audiences in various opera houses around the world, demonstrating both their appeal and their continuing ability to disseminate the discussion and portrayal of celebrity culture. Both *Powder Her Face* and *Anna Nicole* have been broadcast on television, and *When She Died…Death of a Princess*, was actually made for the small screen rather than the opera house. This provides the potential to reach a wider and more diverse audience than opera house productions can do alone by themselves. As Linda Hutcheon points out:

> Today, opera is no longer an elitist form of high art; it openly seeks to be accessible to a wider audience, while still remaining an art form. This has meant that regional opera has expanded enormously, as has opera in colleges and universities. In fact, opera is arguably the healthiest of all the forms of classical music today, in part, perhaps, because it has embraced its popular roots and broken down the barriers once set up between opera and Broadway musicals, cinema, jazz, and even rock music. This is yet another way in which, for opera, what’s old is certainly new again. 353

Each of the three operas analysed and discussed as part of this study have a significant contribution to make to the study of celebrity. Each, in their own way, help provide some depth to the celebrity surface through which, as Marshall points out, ‘contemporary culture produces significance and investment in particular identities, moments and personalities.’ They are, of course, very different from one another, which is in part a result of their composers’ differing status within the music community and varying life experiences and expectations. For example, it could be argued that Casken’s use of a literary source and his complex use of parallel narratives reflect a career that has been primarily based in academe, while Adès and Turnage’s use of a more sensationalist approach reflects their need to create work which will generate an income as they cannot rely on a regular salary. However, this is the subject for another thesis. What is certain is together they provide a rich and varied contribution for the academic study of celebrity culture, which is gradually drawing in other disciplines in order to gain a depth and breadth of understanding of a phenomenon that has significance for each of us in the twenty-first century.

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