

Williams on Garval (2012)

Garval, Michael D. *Cléo de Mérode and the Rise of Modern Celebrity Culture*. Surrey: Ashgate, 2012. Pp. 265. ISBN: 978-1-4094-0603-7

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In *Cléo de Mérode and the Rise of Modern Celebrity Culture*, Michael D. Garval uses the fascinating story of Mérode's rise to fame in order to explore today's all-consuming interest in celebrities, not just as performers, but also as figures whose every movement may be consumed through the media. Garval constructs Mérode as a "Britney Spears avant la lettre" (9), a figure whose sexuality and fame were intimately intertwined, whose image was constructed and transmitted through the (at the time) new media of postcards and posters. In this volume, Mérode becomes emblematic of the growth of these new forms and, for Garval, "anticipates the paradoxical place of celebrated feminine beauty within our mass visual culture, between commodification and creative self-fashioning, exploitation and empowerment" (4). Through his exploration of these topics, Garval's volume makes important contributions to the study of the expansion of modern celebrity culture and the growing importance of visual media in the creation and promotion of fame as we know it today.

In chapter one, "Cleo's ears," Garval takes the hubbub over Cleo's ears, covered by her trademark hairstyle, as characteristic of the overall interest in her persona and uses fascination with her hidden ears to analyze "nascent mass celebrity" (10), so familiar today in an age of reality television, YouTube, and Instagram. He explores the scientific literature of the epoch to link this otic obsession to a "pioneering celebrity journalism" (24) that breathlessly documented Cleo's every move, real or imagined.

Chapter two, "Parisian Sensation," explores Mérode's rise to fame, due much less to her dancing ability itself than to the status of the dancer as mythologized object of lust, and her ability to harness the nascent celebrity-worshipping culture. Garval adroitly scrutinizes the elements that led to Mérode's increasingly public profile, from the myriad public representations of her body in the new print media and in statuary form, to her supposed affair with King Leopold II of Belgium. That incident "provided the catalyst for Mérode's extraordinary rise to celebrity in the years ahead, and gave her first-hand insight into the public relations potential of being—or at least appearing to be—a courtesan" (62).

Chapter three, "American Adventure," recounts Mérode's American trip, its build-up in the press and her ultimate, disappointing reception. As Garval points out, by the time Mérode actually got to America in 1897, thousands of articles had been published about her, and this chapter demonstrates not only Mérode's personal appeal, but, more importantly, the developing culture of mass media that allowed for the frenzied dissemination of celebrity gossip, fashion, and cultural happenings. Ultimately, Mérode's New York stay was notable not for any critical and popular success, but rather for its long term implications with regard to the construction of celebrity in the media; Mérode remained a much-discussed item in the press even after her departure.

Chapter four, "Worldwide Celebrity," charts Mérode's European triumphs as she performed across the continent, a success based as much on the mass-produced images that made her an "international postcard queen" (122) as on her actual performances. Her immensely popular "Cambodian" dances, performed at the 1900 Exposition Universelle in Paris, cemented her status as a star of the expanding genre of postcards. Garval provides an extended analysis of the different genres of postcards that featured Mérode and the various ways they contributed to the burgeoning phenomenon of international stardom. Chapter five, "Celebrity Afterlife," tracks the stage of celebrity so well known today: the fall from the A-list and inevitable comeback attempts. He links her waning fame to the fall of the "heyday of the postcard" (171) and the rise of the movie star in the era following World War I.

Garval rightly envisions Mérode's rise to fame as representative of the intersection of the then-new visual cultural revolution and the ever-rising importance given to celebrity, in particular the body of the sexualized female celebrity. Just as Mérode was unknowable in her lifetime, she rests ungraspable in the volume, as Garval captures her multiple personae as dancer, demimondaine, and fashion icon, famous for being famous. She remains a construction of the media that surrounded and created her during her lifetime, and, as such, Garval ably demonstrates how Mérode's rise to fame, and the nature of that fame, gives insight into the culture of celebrity-worship so familiar today.

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