



*Royalty, Celebrity, and the Press in
Georgian Britain, 1770-1820*

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Abstract: This article argues that the British press created a sense of celebrity around the royal family in the late eighteenth century by providing the British public with extensive information on the private lives of royalty. Analysing newspaper articles and printed images, it examines three case studies from the period: scandalous royal romances, the madness of George III, and the tragic death of a princess. These case studies highlight the increasing exposition of the private as well as public and political aspects of royalty at the intersection of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The article explores how intense media coverage of private royal matters created a discernible culture of “modern celebrity” in relation to the royal family in this era, a culture which ran counter to the official, traditional image of the monarchy. It considers the extent to which this media coverage forged emotional connections between the royal family and the British public, as well as examining the negative impact that media exposure could have on perceptions of the monarchy.

Keywords: British monarchy; eighteenth century; celebrity; public opinion; media; newspapers; satirical prints; history of the press

Introduction

From a twenty-first century perspective, royalty and celebrity may appear to be a natural and indivisible pairing. This connection may also appear to be a phenomenon unique to a period when tabloids, social media, and televised weddings shape our reaction to the current British royal family. This article, however, examines the British royal family as it existed between 1770 and 1820, and aims to illustrate the evolution of a discernible royal celebrity culture in this era. Royal celebrity culture in late Georgian Britain demonstrates what Brian Cowan has described as the merging of traditional “sacral celebrity” with “modern celebrity” which occurred in the eighteenth century.² Cowan argues that medieval and early modern martyrs, saints, and monarchs possessed a type of religiously and politically based celebrity that should be considered a precursor of the modern form of celebrity, which is typically founded on the media and the arts. This article primarily considers how celebrity culture functioned through media such as newspapers and satirical prints, but it also looks at how this “modern” celebrity culture may have affected the way that the public perceived the royal family. Three case studies are used to analyse the interconnections between royalty and celebrity in late Georgian Britain. Firstly, examination of the media coverage of marriages and romantic affairs of royal princes across the period 1770-1800 demonstrates how celebrity culture and scandal interacted in the period. The second case study considers popular reactions to the “madness” of George III in 1788-1789 and again in 1810-1820, as examples of the humanising effects of celebrity culture on royal individuals. The final case study examines public responses to the tragic death of a princess in 1817 to

¹ I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their detailed feedback and guidance on preparing this article for publication.

² Brian Cowan, “Histories of Celebrity in Post-Revolutionary England,” *Historical Social Research/Historische Sozialforschung*, no. 32, supplement, *Celebrity’s Histories: Case Studies & Critical Perspectives* (2019): 86.

demonstrate the strong emotional ties that celebrity culture forged between the British public and the royal family in this period. Overall, the article underlines the gradual movement from political to personal that characterised media coverage of the British royal family in the late eighteenth century.

Celebrity Culture and Eighteenth-Century History

Celebrity culture has received increasing attention from scholars of the eighteenth century in the past decade: many argue that this century in particular marks the beginning of a “modern” culture of celebrity, while others argue for earlier examples of celebrity culture. Robert van Krieken has located many elements of celebrity that pre-date the eighteenth century, including Henry VIII’s and Elizabeth I’s expert management of their public personas. Van Krieken further locates the emergence of a “celebrity society” in the aristocratic court society of early modern Europe.³ Brian Cowan has similarly argued that celebrity was not invented in the eighteenth century, but rather that it flourished as a result of the growing media culture of this era.⁴ In contrast, Stella Tillyard and Fred Inglis have both argued that celebrity culture began in the eighteenth century.⁵ Likewise, Antoine Lilti has suggested three significant aspects of eighteenth-century European society that allowed for the emergence of celebrity culture: the technological advancement of print making, growing consumer culture, and the development of romanticism and its interest in the individual.⁶ Indeed, the word “celebrity” appeared in its modern usage in the eighteenth century.⁷ Extant scholarship on celebrity culture in the eighteenth century looks mostly to theatre actors and actresses; for example studies by Laura Engel, while Lilti’s monograph on celebrity culture largely considers performers and writers, but also politicians and one royal individual: Marie-Antoinette.⁸

Thus far, there has been minimal consideration of how the royal family of Britain was involved in this celebrity culture in the eighteenth century. Relationships between public opinion and the “modern” British royal family have been examined in edited volumes by J.M. Golby and A.W. Purdue, as well as Andrzej Olechnowicz.⁹ Yet these texts focus on the Victorian era and afterwards: there is little attempt to analyse public perceptions of the monarchy under George III or George IV, nor do these works explicitly refer to a celebrity culture surrounding the royal family before the twentieth century. In his study of celebrity culture from the eighteenth century to the present, Fred Inglis discusses George III as an example of a figure who “acquired the aura of celebrity without having to work for it” after his highly publicised illness, but there is no explicit examination of how royalty and celebrity may have functioned together in the eighteenth century.¹⁰

³ Robert van Krieken, *Celebrity Society: the Struggle for Attention*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2019), 11.

⁴ Brian Cowan, “News, Biography, and Eighteenth-Century Celebrity,” in *Oxford Handbooks Online*, ed. Thomas Keymer, general ed. Colin Burrow (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), doi: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199935338.013.132.

⁵ Stella Tillyard, “Celebrity in 18th-Century London,” *History Today* 55, no. 6 (June 2005): 20–27; Fred Inglis, *A Short History of Celebrity* (Princeton, NJ.: Princeton University Press, 2010), 8.

⁶ Lilti, *Invention of Celebrity*, 11. For an examination of the connection between Romanticism and celebrity, see Tom Mole ed., *Romanticism and Celebrity Culture, 1750-1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

⁷ Antoine Lilti, *The Invention of Celebrity* (Malden: Polity Press, 2017), 8.

⁸ See for example, Laura Engel, “Stage Beauties: Actresses and Celebrity Culture in the Long Eighteenth Century,” *Literature Compass*, 13, no. 12 (December, 2016): 749–761; Clara Tuite, *Lord Byron and Scandalous Celebrity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

⁹ J.M. Golby and A.W. Purdue, *The Monarchy and the British People: 1760 to the Present* (London: Batsford, 1988); Andrzej Olechnowicz, ed., *The Monarchy and the British Nation, 1780 to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

¹⁰ Inglis, *Short History of Celebrity*, 59.

The lack of scholarly reference to celebrity in connection with the Georgian monarchy may be explained in two ways: firstly, studies on celebrity culture in the eighteenth century are relatively new, with an increase of scholarship appearing particularly in the last five years. Secondly, there is the issue of terminology: as the royal family occupied a specific and important political role in eighteenth-century Britain, the term “celebrity” can seem slightly problematic, because it possibly suggests an individual “well-known for their well-knownness,” as Daniel Boorstin puts it.¹¹ It is not the intention of this article to argue that the culture of celebrity superseded the political role of the royal family in eighteenth-century Britain; indeed, even the most personal examples of media coverage of the royal family were intrinsically political. The actions of members in the royal family were always viewed from a political lens, because of the political significance of the crown in this era. Increasingly, however, the press in Britain exposed the private, inner workings of royal life to the British public, thus blurring the lines between an official, politicised image of the monarchy, and the humanised and flawed view of the royal family created by the media. In addition to its connection with concepts of being “well known,” “celebrity” can also suggest an individual who was celebrated for great achievements, often in warfare or intellectual pursuits. Antoine Lilti has examined the celebrity culture surrounding figures such as Voltaire and Rousseau from this angle; these figures embody not only the “modern” concept of celebrity, but also older ideas of glory. Lilti also, however, argues that celebrity culture in the eighteenth century meant that a notable individual had an extensive reputation that went beyond their immediate acquaintances.¹² In an article on celebrity studies in the eighteenth century, Cheryl Wanko describes the celebrity as:

someone known mainly via the media circulation of his/her textual and/or visual images, which are minimally controlled by their human referents, necessarily multivalent to embody multiple cultural desires and fears, and absorbed by a cultural machinery that uses, multiplies, reinforces and modifies those images.¹³

In other words, celebrity culture meant that notable individuals in the eighteenth century could be “known,” seen, and scrutinised by people whom they had never met, because the media supplied the public with textual and visual images of that individual. This was not a phenomenon that was born in the eighteenth century; antecedents existed in early modern Europe where the development of mass printing allowed for the publication and distribution of cheap texts and images. However, the uptake in newspapers in Georgian Britain, especially in London, coupled with the expanding market for satirical prints, created a culture of “modern” celebrity which included not only actors, writers or courtesans, but also political figures such as MPs and members of the royal family.¹⁴ Thus, as Cowan has argued, the eighteenth century can be seen as the crux when both early-modern “sacral celebrity” and “modern” celebrity culture met.¹⁵ The family of George III occupied a central position in this hybrid of celebrity culture, as the traditional “sacral

¹¹ Daniel Boorstin, *The Image, or What Happened to the American Dream* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962), 67.

¹² Lilti, *Invention of Celebrity*, 6.

¹³ Cheryl Wanko, “Celebrity Studies in the Long Eighteenth Century: An Interdisciplinary Overview,” *Literature Compass* 8, no. 6 (2011): 351.

¹⁴ Jeremy Black, *A Subject for Taste: Culture in Eighteenth-Century England* (London: Hambledon and London, 2005), 148. For eighteenth-century British satirical prints, see Diana Donald, *The Age of Caricature: Satirical Prints in the Reign of George III* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).

¹⁵ Cowan, “Histories of Celebrity,” 86.

celebrity” of the monarchy was combined with the highly personal, emotional, and invasive form of “modern” celebrity.

The concept of celebrity culture in the eighteenth century is thus a complex one, and, in this article, the term is used to describe the way in which the various aspects of British media communicated non-political information about the royal family to the public. This information ranged from the mundane, such as descriptions of attendees at royal levees, to the scandalous, such as royal affairs and financial ruin. Regardless of its tone, this public discourse surrounding the British royal family grew rapidly in the period 1770 to 1820, and it fundamentally changed the way that the British public reacted to the royal family, not simply as a political institution, but as individuals who were in some way connected to all Britons. George III’s public persona as a fatherly, British-born king is a key example, and it contrasted with the public personas of his two Hanoverian predecessors. Hannah Smith has argued that George I and George II enjoyed popularity as military monarchs and defenders of the Protestant faith, an image which was enhanced through portraiture and literature.¹⁶ Despite their religious and military images, the first two Hanoverian kings do not appear to have engendered the same amount of personal or emotional interest among their British subjects as did George III.¹⁷ The emotional impact of celebrity culture is evident in modern day society, for example, with the deaths of celebrated individuals inspiring public outpourings of grief.¹⁸ The intense emotional aspect of celebrity also existed in Georgian Britain: it has been examined in studies of actresses such as Sarah Siddons.¹⁹ One of the best examples of the emotional dimension of celebrity culture in the Georgian era is the response to George III’s “madness,” which will form part of this paper. Similarly, analysis of public reactions to the untimely death of Princess Charlotte of Wales in 1817 further emphasises how celebrity culture of the period could stir strong emotions for the royal family among the British public. These emotions could be positive, but celebrity culture was also capable of producing negative reactions to the royal family, and nowhere is this more evident than in public discourse surrounding royal marriages and romantic affairs. This aspect of celebrity culture particularly emphasises the risks that an open media could pose to the lofty position of royalty: the royal family was humanised by the media culture of the day, which may have encouraged popular sentiments in their favour, but this humanisation could also lower the royal individual to the gaze of an ordinary subject who suddenly had the ability to form opinions about royal affairs, scandals, and personal losses.

Another significant consideration for studies in celebrity culture hinges on the question of participation: how far did the celebrated individual facilitate or encourage their own celebration in the public sphere? Lilti examines this in regard to Rousseau, who insisted that he did not encourage his own celebrity.²⁰ It has been argued that in the eighteenth-century the British monarchy actively encouraged celebration within the public sphere, particularly during momentous occasions such

¹⁶ Hannah Smith, *Georgian Monarchy: Politics and Culture, 1714-1760* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 21–31.

¹⁷ Linda Colley, “The Apotheosis of George III: Loyalty, Royalty and the British Nation 1760-1820,” *Past & Present*, no. 102 (February 1984): 95.

¹⁸ Lilti, *Invention of Celebrity*, 7.

¹⁹ Megan E. Gibson, “Sarah Siddons, Sensibility, and Enthusiastic Devotion in the British Enlightenment,” *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 42, no. 2 (June 2019): 193–209.

²⁰ Lilti, *Invention of Celebrity*, 112.

as jubilees and military triumphs.²¹ In the eighteenth century, the royal image gained wider opportunities for dissemination: namely, the increase in production of cheap prints, which allowed for official portraits to be reproduced for a mass consumer market. For example, Johan Zoffany's 1770 portrait of George III with his wife and their six children was immediately recreated for a popular market in mezzotint form, thus allowing the wider British public to view this idealised, official image of the royal family as a dynastic success.²²

The evolution between traditional "sacral celebrity" and "modern" celebrity did not always sit easily with the monarchy. It can be argued that the increase in media culture began to undermine the dignity of the "official" royal image, by supplying the British public with information that was unacceptable or upsetting to the royal family. For example, the crown pursued a libel action against *The Morning Herald* newspaper in 1789 after the paper accused the queen and the prime minister, William Pitt the Younger, of hiding information about the king's health from the public.²³ This event shows the crown's awareness of media culture and its understanding that celebrity could be a double-edged sword. Certainly, a great deal of the celebrity culture surrounding the royal family was positive, and much of it may appear mundane to anyone used to the scandals of the modern social media machine. Most newspapers contained a daily report on the whereabouts of the royal family, and detailed discussions of their clothing were also commonplace. These reports can be viewed as precursors to modern day paparazzi and social media posts: in the eighteenth century these press articles meant that British people had a sense of where their royal family was, and they also had detailed information about their outward appearance and their social activities. This was the beginning of the long and complex relationship between celebrity and royalty in Britain.

Royal Romance and Public Scandal

One of the most distinct markers of celebrity culture is a widespread interest in the private lives of celebrated individuals, particularly romantic affairs. Royal marriages were officially celebrated as an important mechanism of the dynasty, but royal romances were technically private, and this was particularly the case when said royal romances were extra-marital. In the latter half of the eighteenth century the British media dedicated numerous articles, prints, and pamphlets to the exposition of clandestine royal affairs, thus allowing the British public to scrutinise the morality of royalty. For example, accusations of a sexual affair between the king's mother, Princess Augusta, and his leading minister, the Earl of Bute, were widespread in the 1760s as Bute's political rivals grappled for supremacy under the reign of the young king. The alleged affair was captured in lurid detail in dozens of satirical prints, yet John Bullion has argued that these accusations against Lord Bute and the Dowager Princess of Wales were likely fabricated to discredit both parties.²⁴ The appeal of publicised royal affairs lay not in their veracity, but in their ability to depict members of the royal family in scandalous and immoral situations. These affairs emphasise the gradual transition between "sacral" and "modern" celebrity that occurred in the eighteenth century; royal affairs were certainly nothing new, but their widespread availability for public consumption in

²¹ Linda Colley highlights the crown's encouragement of the commercialisation and publicisation of the king's jubilee in 1810. Colley, "Apotheosis," 113–114.

²² Richard Earlom after Johan Joseph Zoffany, *Their most Sacred Majesties George the IIIrd and Queen Charlotte*, 1770, paper. London, British Museum, Department of Prints and Drawings, Q,2.6.

²³ M. Dorothy George, *English Political Caricature to 1792: A Study of Opinion and Propaganda* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), 200.

²⁴ John Bullion, "The Origins and Significance of Gossip About Princess Augusta and Lord Bute, 1755-1756," *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 22 (1992): 245–265.

newspapers and satirical prints undermined traditional conceits of the monarchy as an institution that upheld Christian morality.

In 1770, the sensational affair between the king's younger brother the Duke of Cumberland and Lady Grosvenor came to light as a result of a "criminal conversation" or adultery trial brought by Lord Grosvenor against the royal duke. Criminal conversation trials were a staple of British media culture in this era, but, as the council for the plaintiff remarked in this landmark case, there had never been a defendant of such high status before. Despite the very real risk of incurring libel suits, several London publishers produced detailed pamphlets recounting the trial and including letters passed between the duke and his lover.²⁵ These pamphlets were advertised for sale in newspapers such as the *Middlesex Journal*, but other publications such as the *London Evening Post* were evidently wary of directly naming the Duke of Cumberland in relation to a scandal of this magnitude.²⁶ The paper cleverly alluded to the affair two weeks after the trial, with a false advertisement for a dictionary, dedicated to the royal family and published by an "H. Grosvenor at Cumberland-Head in Pall-Mall."²⁷ The name and location of the imagined publisher referred to the jilted husband and lover in the criminal conversation trial, while the reference to a dictionary was an attack on the duke's poor spelling, which was revealed by the circulation of his love letters to Lady Grosvenor. Aside from these examples, press coverage of the affair appears to be limited, but several satirical prints of the trial were published at the time. In an image printed by *The Oxford Magazine*, the duke is depicted in the guise of a fool, speaking to his lover as a disgusted servant pours wine on him.²⁸ Another print depicted the main players of the trial, with the cuckolded Lord Grosvenor wearing horns, and the Duke of Cumberland, on the left with his mistress, confidently declaring "I can do no wrong."²⁹ These examples show that interest in the royal scandal was enough to embolden some printmakers and publishers to produce media depicting the trial and the two lovers. The depth of popular interest in this scandal is further highlighted by an anecdote published in the *Middlesex Journal* shortly after the trial, which stated that, while on an official visit to Portsmouth, the Duke of Cumberland "met with repeated insults" from young boys in the town who had heard about his scandalous affair.³⁰

Although there are distinct examples of "modern" celebrity culture in the Cumberland scandal, at this early period, celebrity culture as it applied to the royal family was limited by the media's inability or reluctance to report on private matters, particularly those of an immoral nature. This reluctance can be seen as a wariness of legal reprisals, as well as a demonstration of the traditional "sacral" celebrity which clung to royalty even as the scandals of "modern" celebrity became more lucrative. The untouchable aura of the royal family did, however, weaken towards the end of the century, and the British media played a significant role in accomplishing this. In the 1780s and 1790s British newspapers and prints exposed several royal affairs, namely those of the

²⁵ For example, [Anon.], *The whole proceedings at large, in a cause on an action brought by the Rt. Hon. Richard Lord Grosvenor against His Royal Highness Henry Frederick, Duke of Cumberland; for criminal conversation with Lady Grosvenor. Tried before the Right Hon. William Lord Mansfield, in the Court of King's Bench, on the 5th of July, 1770. Containing the evidence verbatim as delivered by the witnesses; with all the speeches and arguments of the counsel and of the court. Faithfully taken in shorthand by a Barrister* (London: J. Wheble, 1770).

²⁶ *Middlesex Journal*, 31 July-2 August 1770.

²⁷ *London Evening Post*, 17-19 July 1770.

²⁸ [Anon.], *A certain personage in the Character of a Fool as he perform'd it at Whitechurch & elsewhere*, 1770. London, British Museum, Department of Prints and Drawings, 1868,0808.9902.

²⁹ [Anon.], *The Trial of the D. of C. and Lady G. for Crim. Con.*, 1770. London, British Museum, Department of Prints and Drawings, 1868,0808.9863.

³⁰ *Middlesex Journal*, 31 July-2 August 1770.

king's sons, to the public. It was well known that George III's third son, the Duke of Clarence, lived with the actress Dorothea Jordan with whom he had ten natural children, a situation commented on extensively in satirical prints that played on the connection between Mrs Jordan's name and the contemporary slang for "chamber pot."³¹ Perhaps the best example of how mediated celebrity culture unearthed royal scandal can be seen in the tumultuous love life of the Prince of Wales.

In 1786 the Prince of Wales married his mistress, the Roman Catholic widow, Maria Fitzherbert. Due to the Act of Settlement of 1701 and the Royal Marriages Act of 1772, this marriage was invalid under British law: all royal marriages had to be approved by the monarch, and it was also impossible for a member of the royal family to marry a Roman Catholic without sacrificing his or her place in the line of succession. Much as it had been reluctant to directly reveal the affair of the Duke of Cumberland in 1770, the British press again tiptoed around this royal marriage, and there were very few newspapers that reported on the event. A rare allusion to the marriage appeared in *The Times* on 31 March 1786. In a short snippet, the paper stated: "The report in this metropolis respecting Mrs. F---h---t is, that her marriage has actually taken place." Although unwilling to fully name the prince's wife, the paper concluded by remarking: "It is probable that to the various families of the Fitzes, we shall shortly have the new name added of FitzGeorge," suggesting that Mrs Fitzherbert was pregnant.³² Significantly, the coy response of the press to this scandal was in direct contrast to satirical artists, who made much of this dramatic tale, with over half a dozen prints issued by various artists in March and April of 1786. One of the most notable was James Gillray's *Wife & no wife—or—a trip to the Continent*, which depicted several of the prince's political allies as part of the wedding party; Edmund Burke acts as a Jesuit priest officiating the ceremony, whilst Charles James Fox is shown giving away the bride. Many of the images are quite repetitive in content: they depict the secret marriage between the Prince of Wales and Mrs Fitzherbert, or they imagine the couple celebrating and dancing after the ceremony.³³ Nonetheless, these prints reveal the mechanism of celebrity culture at this moment in time: when the press was perhaps unable to comment in depth on a scandal concerning the heir to the throne, satirical prints stepped in to provide the British public with the scandalous details of the Prince of Wales's marriage. Even with the threat of legal reprisals looming, celebrity culture of the royal family continued to develop, meeting a public demand for scandal.

³¹ See for example, William Dent, *Fording the Jordan*, 1791. London, British Museum, Department of Prints and Drawings, 1868,0808.6119. For more on the Duke of Clarence's relationship with Dorothea Jordan, see Claire Tomalin, *Mrs Jordan's Profession* (London: Viking, 1994).

³² *The Times*, 31 March 1786.

³³ See for example: [Anon.], *The wedding night or the fashionable frolic*, 1786. London, British Museum, Department of Prints and Drawings, 1868,0808.5491.



Figure 1. James Gillray, *Wife & no wife—or—A trip to the Continent* [graphic] / design'd by Carlo Khan, 1786, paper, 409 x 510 mm. Farmington CT, Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University, 786.03.27.01.2+++. Courtesy of the Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University.

Commentary on the love life of the Prince of Wales remained a key feature of media culture in Britain throughout his life, but the prince's troubled marriage to Caroline of Brunswick was undoubtedly the most commented upon royal scandal between 1790 and 1820. Press coverage of the marriage in 1795 underlines the extent to which celebrity culture had developed since 1786: whereas the prince's illegal marriage to Maria Fitzherbert was largely unreported in the British press, likely because of the threat of libel cases, his legal marriage with Caroline was minutely dissected and judged in the British public sphere. The royal wedding on 8 April 1795 occurred amidst a cacophony of popular sentiment, and newspapers were awash with articles about the new Princess of Wales and her felicitous marriage into the royal family. This positive image of the royal marriage began to decline rapidly, however, as tales of the prince's continuing infidelities appeared in the press and in satirical prints in 1796.³⁴ The affair most covered by the press at this time was the prince's long-term relationship with the Countess of Jersey. In contrast to the secrecy of the prince's illicit relationship with Maria Fitzherbert ten years prior, it is evident that in 1796 the British press was confident in conveying to the public every scurrilous piece of gossip about the Jersey affair. Indeed, such was the public exposition of the affair that the Earl of Jersey felt it

³⁴ Corinna Wagner, "Public Scandal, Class, and the Struggle for Cultural Authority in the 1790s," *Nineteenth-Century Studies* 22 (2008):1–14.

necessary to publish a pamphlet defending his wife's honour.³⁵ In spite of this futile attempt to quell popular discussion, the Countess of Jersey ultimately resigned her position as lady of the bedchamber to the Princess of Wales in July 1796, after being threatened with violence by members of the public. *The Times* printed the Countess's letter of resignation in full; in the letter, Lady Jersey acknowledged the impact of the "infamous and unjustifiable paragraphs in the Publick [sic] Papers" that had revealed the affair, and stated her belief that the "falsehoods" had been spread by those wishing to attack the reputation of the Prince of Wales and the royal family.³⁶ Although Lady Jersey focused on the scandalous reports in the press, there were numerous satirical prints of the affair published as well. In *The Jersey Smuggler Detect'd*, for example, the Princess of Wales is depicted exiting her daughter's nursery to discover her husband in bed with Lady Jersey.³⁷ The public revelations of the Jersey affair in 1796 emphasise the extent to which celebrity culture had developed in Britain by the end of the century—every aspect of royal life was open for depiction and discussion in the British public sphere, and neither press nor prints hesitated to portray the heir to the throne in the most scandalous of situations. In fact, *The True Briton* newspaper claimed in 1797 that revealing "the private characters" of public individuals was an integral role of the press in Britain.³⁸

These examples show the development of a "modern" royal celebrity culture in the British media between 1770 and 1796. The Duke of Cumberland's adultery scandal in 1770 was discussed in largely oblique terms by the British press, yet the impact of the affair on the duke's public reputation does suggest that the press coverage of the criminal conversation trial was of significant interest to the British public. In 1786 the Prince of Wales's illicit marriage was only vaguely alluded to in British newspapers, once again highlighting the limitations of celebrity culture at this time. However, this event was widely covered and mocked by satirical prints, which did not appear to have the same reservations about publicising the royal scandal as did the press. By 1796 the press was more willing to discuss royal affairs and infidelities openly, as the Jersey affair demonstrates. This change in the revelation of scandal was indicative of the growth of a "modern" celebrity culture around the royal family, as this culture demanded the publicisation of private royal affairs in ways not seen earlier in the century. That the Earl of Jersey felt it necessary to publish a refutation of public gossip against his wife shows the power of public opinion in this era, and from examining these royal affairs, it is evident that this public opinion could have a very negative effect on the royal image. Modern celebrity culture gained new ground towards the end of the century, and it challenged not only the royal family's right to privacy in personal matters, but also any illusion of their moral superiority which may have been upheld by the traditional "sacral" celebrity of earlier eras.

The "Mad" King: Vulnerability and Majesty

Royal romances played a substantial role in the development of a "modern" celebrity culture in eighteenth-century Britain, but another significant example was the media attention surrounding the madness of King George III. The king's sixty-year reign was defined by several bouts of

³⁵ *The Telegraph* referred to the Earl's pamphlet on July 21, 1796. In the same publication, the paper shared letters written between Lady Jersey and her friends.

³⁶ *The Times*, 26 July 1796.

³⁷ James Gillray, *The Jersey smuggler detect'd; —or— good causes for discontent*, 1796. Farmington CT, Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University, 796.05.24.01+.

³⁸ *The True Briton*, 11 January 1797.

madness, and as such the status of his health became a staple part of the media culture of the day. An exhibition by the Georgian Papers Programme has recently explored documents in the Royal Archives relating to the king's mental illness, while biographies by Andrew Roberts, Jeremy Black, and Christopher Hibbert similarly explore the king's experience.³⁹ George III's madness has also been analysed by historians such as Linda Colley, who argued that the king enjoyed a boost in popular support as a result of public knowledge of his illness.⁴⁰ The king's madness is thus a well-trodden path in historical scholarship, but there is a previously unexplored link between celebrity culture in Britain and George III's mental illness.

The first instance of popular discourse surrounding the king's madness emerged when he fell ill in late 1788, and parliamentary discussions about a possible Regency prompted what became known as the Regency Crisis. This crisis is a prime example of how modern celebrity culture affected the royal family, as several members, including the Prince of Wales and Queen Charlotte, were placed under a microscope in the British public sphere. Much of the content centred on the political aspects of the crisis, but analysis of newspapers and visual culture emphasises the recurrent motif of a helpless king. This motif emerged from nationwide interest in the king's recovery that was spurred on by the emotive impact of celebrity culture and the intensity of media coverage on the king's condition. In addition to the official reports published daily by the king's physicians, the majority of British newspapers provided brief updates on his health to their readers every day throughout the winter of 1788 and into the spring of 1789.⁴¹ On 20 February 1789 the first page of *The World* newspaper declared, in block capitals: "The King is perfectly and completely recovered," before proceeding to divulge the king's conversations with his ministers and the return of his physical fitness.⁴² *The Times* reported a few days later "information [which] must be most pleasing to the public at large," namely of the impossibility of the king suffering a relapse.⁴³ Although an incorrect diagnosis, the paper's wording emphasises the popular awareness of and interest in the king's health, which was also expressed through public demonstrations, thanksgiving services, and loyal addresses across Britain.⁴⁴ It appears that, although George III's mental illness jeopardised his political status as king, it also made him a figure of interest and of empathy to the British public.

The king's health also appeared in popular visual media produced in 1788-1789. Satirical prints were a significant, visual dimension of the British public sphere at this time, and they frequently lampooned leading politicians and members of the royal family. Significantly, however, there appear to be few prints that directly depicted the king's madness during the Regency Crisis. A rare example is *Royal Dipping*, which depicts the king taking a dip in the sea at Weymouth on the

³⁹ Arthur Burns and Karin Wulf, *George III: the Eighteenth Century's Most Prominent Mental Patient: a Virtual Exhibition*, Georgian Papers Programme, accessed 28 July 2022, <https://georgianpapers.com/explore-the-collections/virtual-exhibits/george-iii-the-eighteenth-centurys-most-prominent-mental-health-patient-a-virtual-exhibition-by-arthur-burns-and-karin-wulf/>; Andrew Roberts, *George III: The Life and Reign of Britain's Most Misunderstood Monarch* (London: Allen Lane, 2021); Jeremy Black, *George III: Majesty and Madness* (London: Allen Lane, 2020); Christopher Hibbert, *George III. A Personal History* (London: Viking/Penguin Books, 1998).

⁴⁰ Vincent Carretta, *George III and the Satirists from Hogarth to Byron* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1990); Colley, "Apotheosis," 94-129.

⁴¹ For example, the *St. James's Chronicle or the British Evening Post*, London, 1 January, 1789-3 January 1789; *The Times*, London, 2 January 1789.

⁴² *The World*, London, 20 February 1789.

⁴³ *The Times*, London, 25 February 1789.

⁴⁴ James Horn Van Melton, *The Rise of the Public in Enlightenment Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 61.

advice of his physicians.⁴⁵ The image revolves around a story that a troupe of musicians had struck up the tune of “God Save the King” as George III entered the water—even in this delicate, private moment, his identity as sovereign was not forgotten.⁴⁶ The grandeur of “God Save the King” is juxtaposed with the king’s confused, caricatured features. Tamara Hunt has analysed this print as damaging to the sovereign’s reputation, but it was arguably more likely to inspire empathy in viewers than mockery.⁴⁷ Certainly, this image does not imbue George III with an aura of majesty, but this is perhaps a case of mistaken intention. The revelation of this intimate moment in the king’s recovery could have been interpreted in several ways by those who viewed the image, from empathy to amusement. Regardless of the public’s response to this image, the print stands as an example of the freedom of media culture in Britain at the time, one that was capable of depicting the royal family in a highly humanised and vulnerable manner. The prints and newspaper articles that circulated during the Regency Crisis are a reflection on public sentiment concerning the king. The king’s health was a serious issue which engaged popular interest in Britain for many months, and public outcry ensued when journalists and members of the public felt that information about his status was too vague; modern celebrity culture demanded that information about the king be freely shared, not kept behind closed doors at court.

This public hunger for information about the king re-emerged when he suffered from another serious lapse into “madness” in 1810 after shorter instances in 1801 and 1804, and the media again provided particulars to the British public on a regular basis. This later lapse in the king’s health was not, however, a short-term event as in 1788-1789, but rather, one that lasted for ten years until the king’s eventual death in 1820. During the Regency, George III withdrew from public and political life completely. Hidden away at Windsor Castle with his physicians and attendants, one may have expected that the king would cease to feature in newspapers and prints, but this was not the case. Newspapers across Britain provided their readers with frequent updates on the king’s health. For example, in December 1810, *The Lancaster Gazette* published the king’s twice daily health bulletins, and also reported on the profusion of public prayers for his recovery in both Anglican and Catholic churches.⁴⁸ In February 1811 *The Leeds Mercury* similarly published the official health bulletins from the king’s physicians, but it also reported that the king had dined with members of his family and walked on Windsor Terrace.⁴⁹ Other regional newspapers such as the *Caledonian Mercury*, *The Royal Cornwall Gazette*, and *The York Herald* also dedicated many column inches to reporting on the king between 1810 and 1820, while official prints of the king continued to be published and circulated across Britain. For example, *His Most Gracious Majesty King George the Third*, a print published in London in 1812, was adapted from an earlier portrait by William Beechey.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ [Anon.], *Royal Dipping*, 1789. London, British Museum, Department of Prints and Drawings, 1868,0808.5877.

⁴⁶ Fanny Burney recorded the incident in her diary, although the king’s sojourn at Weymouth was also reported in the press. See Frances Burney, *The Diary and Letters of Frances Burney*, ed. Sarah Woolsey (Boston, 1880), 2: 149.

⁴⁷ Tamara L. Hunt, *Defining John Bull: Political Caricature and National Identity in Late Georgian England* (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2003), 66.

⁴⁸ *The Lancaster Gazette*, 1 December 1810.

⁴⁹ *The Leeds Mercury*, 23 February 1811.

⁵⁰ Benjamin Smith after William Beechey, *His Most Gracious Majesty King George the Third*, 1812. Farmington CT, Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University, Portraits G347 no. 18.

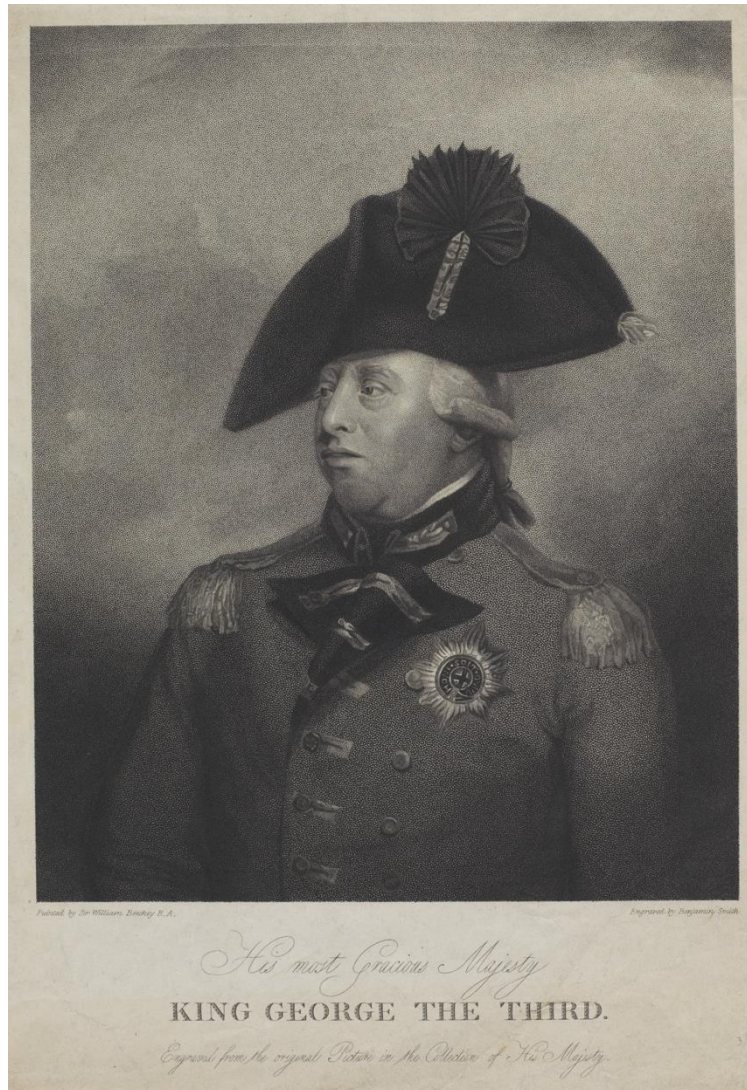


Figure 2. Benjamin Smith after William Beechey, *His Most Gracious Majesty King George the Third*, 1812, paper, 393 x 278 mm. Farmington CT, Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University, Portraits G347 no. 18. Courtesy of the Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University.

While the Regent authorised the publication of official bulletins on the king's health, these reports from the royal physicians do not appear to have satisfied the appetite for information among the British public and the press. In 1811, *The York Herald* published an article attacking the official bulletins released by the king's physicians, stating that "they are infinitely more calculated to perplex than to elucidate." The article argued that the "foolish, affected concealment" of the king's health was ludicrous and unnecessary, for "there is not a single person in the united kingdom who is not perfectly acquainted with His Majesty's affliction."⁵¹ The media continued to challenge any concealment of the king's condition, as *The Leeds Mercury* pointed out in July 1812 that the king's affectionate subjects did not believe in the concept of "out of sight out of mind."⁵² Concern about the "disappearance" of the king from public view was raised by *The Lancaster Gazette* in 1816, which stated "our good old king has been so long withdrawn from the view of his affectionate and

⁵¹ *The York Herald*, 7 September 1811.

⁵² *The Leeds Mercury*, 11 July 1812.

loyal subjects the public press has ceased to notice his Majesty in its accounts of the royal family.”⁵³ However, reports on the king’s wellbeing endured long after the commencement of the Regency, and newspapers across Britain participated in stimulating public interest in the king. For example, in 1816, the *Caledonian Mercury* outlined the care given to the king at Windsor, the regular attendance of his family, and his daily regimen.⁵⁴ Even towards the end of the king’s life, newspapers continued to provide the public with glimpses into the royal chambers at Windsor, no matter how brief: *The Morning Post*, for example, recounted that a lady of rank had seen the king walking within his apartments, looking “uncommonly well” in December 1818.⁵⁵

These reports, spread across ten years, emphasise the press’s persistent reporting on the king, even when those reports were of little genuine substance or political significance. George III had ceased to be a ruling monarch, but public interest in his wellbeing and his day-to-day life continued throughout the Regency period. This public interest points to an emotive connection between the British public and their sovereign, a connection buoyed by the celebrity culture created by the press. Through newspaper articles and printed images, the British public were afforded a view into the private life of the king during the most vulnerable periods of his life. Press coverage of the king’s illness emphasises how the traditional and symbolic “sacral” celebrity attached to early modern monarchy was merged with the highly personal form of “modern” celebrity. The extensive and detailed nature of the press coverage surrounding the king’s madness in the Regency Crisis and during the Regency period undoubtedly bred a sense of emotional intimacy that is characteristic of the burgeoning “modern” celebrity in eighteenth-century Britain.⁵⁶

The Death of the People’s Princess

The emotional impact of celebrity culture as it related to the British royal family is exemplified by the premature death of Princess Charlotte of Wales in 1817. The daughter and sole legitimate offspring of the Regent and his wife Caroline, Princess Charlotte was second-in-line to the British throne.⁵⁷ Enjoying a popularity denied to her father, Charlotte was adored by the British press and the public: her death during childbirth at the age of twenty-one prompted an outpouring of public grief that underlined the extent to which modern celebrity culture had forged a deep emotional connection between the royal family and the British public.

Charlotte’s funeral on 18 November was marked across Britain by the closure of businesses, and a profusion of sermons for the local communities. The *Caledonian Mercury* published accounts from across Scotland of parishes participating in processions and deep mourning for Charlotte. In Glasgow all trade was stopped for the day of Charlotte’s funeral, and all churches were draped in black. Bells tolled for hours and church services were full, which the paper described as “a solemn expression of the deep sorrow that so severe a national calamity has impressed upon the hearts of the people.” Such was the princess’s popularity among the British people that even those from Catholic churches and dissenting chapels paid homage to her passing: the *Caledonian Mercury* mentions the dissenting halls of worship in Paisley draping their interiors in black as a sign of mourning. Significantly, the paper reports that in Perth, the whole of the

⁵³ *The Lancaster Gazette*, 7 September 1816.

⁵⁴ *Caledonian Mercury*, 20 January 1816.

⁵⁵ *The Morning Post*, 15 December 1818.

⁵⁶ Inglis, *Short History of Celebrity*, 59.

⁵⁷ For a recent biography of Princess Charlotte, see Anne Stott, *The Lost Queen: The Life & Tragedy of the Prince Regent’s Daughter* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2020).

congregation were in deep mourning “as if deploring the loss of a near relation.”⁵⁸ The notion of a familial relationship between the public and the princess was reiterated in *The Times*, which discussed public concern for the princess’s widower, Prince Leopold of Saxe-Coburg-Saalfeld: stating: “The old inquire about him as about a son, the young as about a brother.”⁵⁹ These remarks highlight the sense of close personal relationships that modern celebrity culture was able to foster: in this time of tragedy, the British public did not see Charlotte and her husband as distant political figures, but rather as relatives or loved ones.

Quite apart from her significance to the political future of Britain, Charlotte appeared to engender something of a cult of worship in the British public sphere, which hinged on her acts of kindness and Christian morality. A few weeks after Charlotte’s death, *The Morning Post*, for example, printed a long article about a young gardener at the princess’s home, Claremont. The gardener was profoundly affected by the princess’s death, as, despite being his employer, the princess had often “entered into familiar conversation with the boy” and praised his hard work. This anecdote served to illustrate Princess Charlotte’s charisma and her lack of hauteur around the “common people,” an attribute that would have appealed to many of the paper’s readers.⁶⁰ In a later article, *The Morning Post* again highlighted the princess’s empathy for those less fortunate, in relating her appeals to her father to remit the death sentence for a young man after a clergyman appealed to her for assistance in the matter.⁶¹

The shock occasioned by Princess Charlotte’s sudden death was reiterated in the British press for months after her passing. In December 1817, *The Hull Packet* compared the impact of Charlotte’s death to that of a sovereign’s but argued that her death did not encourage the political criticism that was commonplace after the death of a monarch. The paper also argued that the sudden death of someone so young and important caused people to demand answers and full details of the event, which the paper endeavoured to provide in the article by including minute details of the princess’s death and that of her stillborn son across several pages.⁶² Popular desire to receive all of the information surrounding Charlotte’s death led to accusations of callousness being levelled against her relatives, none of whom were present at her home when she gave birth. The British press dissected the events of the princess’s demise repeatedly, thus heightening the public’s awareness of and interest in the tragedy.

Visual representations of the tragedy were also a significant part of the public grieving process: portrait engravings of Princess Charlotte, many adapted from earlier paintings, flooded the print shops in Britain.⁶³ Others were created specifically for the act of mourning, such as *Britannia’s Hope, Her Love and Now Her Grief*, which captured not only the spirit of public mourning, but also the emblem of hope that the princess had represented in Britain as a future sovereign by envisioning the figure of Britannia weeping at the princess’s grave.⁶⁴ *Apotheosis of Her Royal Highness the Princess Charlotte Augusta of Wales* showed a stylised view of the princess at the moment of her death, ascending to Heaven in the company of angels whilst the figure of Britannia wept at her

⁵⁸ *Caledonian Mercury*, 22 November 1817.

⁵⁹ *The Times*, 19 November 1817.

⁶⁰ *The Morning Post*, 6 December 1817.

⁶¹ *The Morning Post*, 13 December 1817.

⁶² *The Hull Packet*, 16 December 1817.

⁶³ For example, William Say after George Dawe, *Her Royal Highness the Princess Charlotte of Saxe Coburg etc.* 1817. London, British Museum, Department of Prints and Drawings, 1902,1011.4111.

⁶⁴ John Kennerley after William Marshall Craig, *Britannia’s Hope, Her Love and Now Her Grief*, 1817. London, British Museum, Department of Prints and Drawings, 1868,0808.1524.

sarcophagus.⁶⁵ The print's use of religious motifs seems to demonstrate the blurring of "sacral celebrity" with "modern" celebrity. Much like the newspaper articles which reported on every detail surrounding Princess Charlotte's death, these prints aided the public in visualising the tragedy and allowed them to feel as if they too had been present in the royal bedchamber when it occurred.



Figure 3. Fry & Wright, after Edward Francisco Burney, after R.P. Read, *Apotheosis of Her Royal Highness the Princess Charlotte Augusta of Wales*, 1818, paper, 484 x 580 mm. National Portrait Gallery of the UK, NPG D33524. © National Portrait Gallery, London.

In addition to printed images, commemorative mourning medallions were created for public sale: most displayed Princess Charlotte's profile on one side, with funerary monuments, mourners, or significant dates in the princess's life on the reverse.⁶⁶ Just one month after Charlotte's death, *The Morning Post* reported that a biographical memoir of the princess's life was forthcoming, while in January 1818 there appeared an advertisement for a memorial folio entitled *The Augustiad* which would contain portraits, sketches, and facsimiles of the tributes paid to "the lamented Hope of England" by the press and public.⁶⁷ In December 1817, *The Royal Cornwall Gazette* wrote of a monument to be erected in Westminster Abbey and the creation of a

⁶⁵ Fry & Wright, after Edward Francisco Burney, after R.P. Read, *Apotheosis of Her Royal Highness the Princess Charlotte Augusta of Wales*, 1818. National Portrait Gallery, London. NPG D33524.

⁶⁶ Bronze medal by Edward Avern, 1817. London, British Museum, Department of Coins and Medals, 1958,1112.4.

⁶⁷ *The Morning Post*, 22 December 1817. *The Morning Post*, 15 January 1818.

subscription among the public for a commemorative building for “The Nation’s Favourite and the Nation’s Friend.”⁶⁸ The public reaction to the princess’s death was thus recorded and shaped by a variety of media, from newspaper articles, to medallions, prints, biographical memoirs, and even monuments. Significantly, public interest in the princess’s death continued for many years. In 1826 a commemorative print of Princess Charlotte’s death was released, while prints of the princess’s monument in St George’s Chapel, Windsor were newly published and sold to the public as late as 1831.⁶⁹

The tragic death of Princess Charlotte underlines the extent to which celebrity culture had created an emotional connection between the British public and the royal family in the early nineteenth century. This connection was strengthened by the media, as newspapers and printmakers continued to stoke public emotion for the princess in the months and years after her death. The creation of commemorative prints, medallions, and monuments demonstrates how celebrity culture and mourning functioned together at this time of national tragedy: these items were tangible objects that could endure as tokens of public grief for many years. Significantly, most of the articles, prints, and medallions presumed that grief for Charlotte was a nationwide phenomenon, shared by all: reports of sermons and closure of businesses across Britain on the day of her funeral reiterated the idea that this tragedy was one that would affect all Britons. Princess Charlotte was not mourned simply because she had been second in line to the throne, but because she had been held in such affection and esteem by thousands of people who had never met her, but who felt a strong emotional connection to her as a result of “modern” celebrity culture.

Conclusion

This article has explored three case studies that highlight the relationship between royalty and celebrity in the period 1770 to 1820. The examples analysed here are part of a much wider media obsession with the lives, loves, and tragedies of the British royal family in the Georgian era, an obsession that demonstrated the merging of traditional “sacral celebrity” attached to the monarchy and a “modern” celebrity that required the public revelation of royal private lives. The article has endeavoured to highlight not only the central role played by the media in formulating a royal celebrity culture, but also the ways in which this celebrity culture could impact on the status of the royal family itself.

The exposition of the romantic affairs of princes such as the Duke of Cumberland and the Prince of Wales underline the risk that this modern celebrity culture could pose to the moral and Protestant image of monarchy that was espoused by George III. Although the sources examined in this section were overwhelmingly reluctant to directly name the people involved, it is evident that gossip about these affairs was spread far and wide by newspapers, pamphlets, and satirical prints. These sources held up the scandals of royal princes for the entertainment and condemnation of the British public, who were able to apprise themselves of extremely personal and private details of these romantic affairs in a manner that transgressed the boundaries between the public and private faces of royalty. In contrast to these romantic scandals, the cases of George III’s madness and the death of Princess Charlotte both emphasise how “modern” celebrity culture could enhance the royal image, by forging emotional connections between royal individuals and

⁶⁸ *The Royal Cornwall Gazette*, 6 December 1817.

⁶⁹ Cosmo Armstrong after Sir Thomas Lawrence, *Sacred to the Memory of her Late Lamented Royal Highness Princess Charlotte of Wales & of Saxe-Cobourg Saalfeld*, 1826. London, British Museum, Department of Prints and Drawings, 1878,0713.1932.

the British public. The persistent media coverage of George III during the Regency period is ample evidence of an enduring public interest in the king's wellbeing that went beyond the political and into the personal. The outpouring of grief at the death of Princess Charlotte in 1817 was a combination of political and personal concern: as second in line to the throne, Charlotte had been held up as "the hope" of Britain, and media responses to her death constantly referred to the loss as a patriotic tragedy. However, many responses to Charlotte's early death were highly emotional, and there is evidence of widespread mourning for the princess across Britain. In this instance, "modern" celebrity culture could facilitate a shared experience of mourning between the people and the monarchy.

The case studies examined demonstrate that the development of a "modern" celebrity culture had a significant impact on the way that the British royal family was perceived by the public at the intersection between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The proliferation of media culture and its increasing ability to navigate libel laws facilitated the gradual movement from "sacral celebrity" to a "modern" celebrity culture surrounding the royal family. This movement had a powerful effect on the royal family's image in the period, as traditional notions of deference and respect for the monarchy were challenged by the invasive and personal nature of "modern" celebrity culture.