

**Spectacular Disappearances: Celebrity and Privacy, 1696–1801.** By Julia H. Fawcett. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016; pp. ix + 280, 15 illustrations. \$65 cloth, \$52.95 e-book.

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I would love to read Julia Fawcett's analysis of Donald Trump.

That was my thought upon finishing her remarkable new book, *Spectacular Disappearances: Celebrity and Privacy, 1696–1801*. Though her title sets historical parameters on her investigations, her central concept, like the behaviors it describes, is dazzling, and once you see it working in eighteenth-century culture, you see it everywhere you look. This is the idea of “overexpression,” a strategy by which celebrities enhance or exaggerate their known features until any other “private” details about them become impossible to see (3). Fawcett contends that this behavior began to be deployed in the eighteenth century to address a conundrum specific to the newly emergent individual as “celebrity”: how to maintain control over one's self representation, or indeed maintain any sense of privacy at all, when, suddenly, you can be seen by the whole world. Contemporary celebrities employ this behavior too, as Fawcett indicates in her sharp analysis of the Michael Jackson *Thriller* video that concludes her book. The coda reveals poignantly how “[t]he traces of overexpression . . . still linger” and can, as a result, “teach us the importance of long-past performances” (207). The performance genealogy of dancing zombies, crotch grabs, and twenty-first-century facial recognition software has never been so clear (210–13).

As my last sentence starts to indicate, this book is packed. Fawcett anchors each chapter on an individual or group of individuals who practiced overexpression and on a particular prop associated with these individuals' behaviors: Colley Cibber and the crown (Chapter 1); Cibber and Charlotte Charke, and the wig (Chapter 2); Laurence Sterne and the printed page (Chapter 3); David Garrick and George Anne Bellamy, and the wig again (Chapter 4); and Mary Robinson and the miniature portrait (Chapter 5). The result is a narrative of overexpression's inheritance: not only an unpacking of what early celebrities did to please their public without utterly sacrificing their own sense of self, but also an illuminating of how these behaviors were observed and appropriated by successors. Cibber—Restoration playwright, comic actor, autobiographer, and oft-mocked poet laureate—initiates the process with his oversized wigs, his exaggerated prose, and his ability to defang his critics by performing, preemptively, their own satirical critiques. In Fawcett's narrative, Charke, Sterne, Bellamy, and Garrick (most of them actors, with the exception of the novelist, Sterne) then adopt, modify, and deploy with varying degrees of success the behaviors inaugurated by Cibber. Robinson, an actor turned poetess, does so too, but with a twist: her strategies might be termed over-overexpressive, as through her writings and self-promotion, she plays up the implications of the stage name “Perdita,” bestowed upon her at the beginning of her career. If Cibber could resist the public gaze by exaggerating his mispronunciation, his fop-pish tendencies, or the size of his wig, Robinson turned this strategy on its head, as it were, by exaggerating her embodiment of loss.

Fawcett draws upon autobiographical theory, material culture, and performance studies, but she is a particularly sensitive close reader and uses this talent to support contentions that at first blush might seem far-fetched. Was Mary Robinson *really* making a pun about overexpression in that poem of hers (189–90)? Was Charlotte Charke *really* engaging in literary allusion and thus a type of overexpression when she happened to misspell the word “*paraphanalia*” in print (88)? Fawcett’s training as a literary critic, and thus someone attuned to minute textual details, enables her to draw important parallels between the written language deployed by these celebrities and the embodied performances they offer up, convincing readers of her bold claims. (I’d flag particularly sections in Chapters 1 and 2 on Cibber and Chapter 3 on Sterne.) Such treats are scattered throughout this book: small details about spelling (“*paraphanalia*,” “*harse*”), when you look closely at them, expand in significance; overlooked manuscripts (such as Garrick’s afterpiece *The Meeting of the Company* [1774]) emerge deservedly from the shadows (146–8); oft-repeated anecdotes, such as the beloved tale of Garrick’s mechanical wig, take on new contours when exposed to Fawcett’s anatomizing gaze (156–8). Fawcett seemingly takes on the strategy she identifies in her protagonists as a challenge. She reveals the details that overexpression should render invisible, almost beating her protagonists at their own game.

I mean that last phrase as a compliment. Paradoxes, in the hands of unskilled practitioners, often seem to breed more paradoxes, but Fawcett brings a decided clarity to her complex subject. Taken up herself with metaphors of interior and exterior, light and dark, Fawcett encourages her own readers not to dig in so much as to stand back and watch. If this leaves the assigned reviewer feeling less like a participatory Shandean reader than an applauding member of the crowd, it also means that the experience of reading criticism feels like entertainment. My only slight divergence with Fawcett’s readings was with her discussions of the overexpressive failures of Charke and Bellamy, two women whose exaggerated expressions were read by contemporaries as expressive of some sense of self. In general, the eighteenth-century attitude toward women that I’ve encountered flags women as by nature theatrical, in the sense of hypocritical, leading me to expect that women would have had to work much harder than men to have a strategy of overexpression tolerated, if not believed. I wanted to hear more from Fawcett about why, for Charke and Bellamy, this was not the case. Otherwise I found that, like any master of overexpression, Fawcett has preempted critical response.

She has also, in the process, intrigued me about contemporary manifestations or exceptions to her rules. If overexpression, in her own analysis, is our modern inheritance, do the motivations for overexpression remain the same? What does it mean when an exaggerated persona seems to be no longer a mask but the man himself? Is overexpression still a coping mechanism for the performer? Or has it become a weapon wielded against those who now truly can’t look away?

When it comes to Trump, what would Julia say?

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