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Michael D. Garval, *Cléo de Mérode and the Rise of Modern Celebrity Culture*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2012, 265 pp. with 40 black and white illustrations. £60 (hbk). ISBN 9781409406037.

Review by Julie Townsend, University of Redlands

Michael Garval's monograph is the first book-length, English-language study on the Parisian performer Cléo de Mérode in the context of emerging modern celebrity. The volume divides its time between the details of Mérode's self-publicizing, some biographical information, journalistic responses to her in France and the United States, and some contextual material from the realms of media and politics. Garval's primary argument is that Mérode might be read as a precursor to such celebrities as Britney Spears or Paris Hilton, famous more for their ability to exploit--and perhaps direct--popular tastes than for their skill or artistry. "So much about Mérode's story," he writes, "anticipates the paradoxical place of celebrated feminine beauty within our mass visual culture, between commodification and creative self-fashioning, exploitation and empowerment" (p. 4).

Notable events in Mérode's career include the scandal provoked by Alexandre Falguière's sculpture *La Danseuse* (1896), for which she was the model, and her possible romantic attachment to King Leopold II of Belgium. She was equally known for her bandeau hairstyle (which provoked considerable debate on the state of her ears) and her use of postcard images of herself to promote her image in France and abroad.

Garval's work is at its best when it brings to light a variety of viewpoints on Mérode from journalistic and archival materials. He details several compelling examples of Mérode as a relevant cultural figure, for instance, in caricatures of King Leopold's genocidal exploits in the Congo, or as the petitioner in a slander case against Simone de Beauvoir in the 1950s.

The monograph gives considerable attention to Mérode's failure to charm American audiences, and it might have been interesting to further explore the notion of national identity and female celebrity. Many of his observations on Mérode's role in the development of modern celebrity culture seem to fall somewhat short of their potential. Similarly, a reader who is not already fairly familiar with the landscape of female performers in Paris in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries might have difficulty contextualizing Mérode among the many outstanding and fascinating female performers of the Parisian *fin de siècle*. Insofar as it brings together performing and visual cultures in the context of modern celebrity, this work offers useful insights and opens some doors for further exploration.

Julie Townsend
University of Redlands
Julie_townsend@redlands.edu

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