Mourning, Myth, and Merchandising

The Public Death of Princess Charlotte

THE OUTPOURING OF PUBLIC GRIEF over the death of Princess Diana of Wales in 1997, and the widespread and often frankly commercial public activities of mourning that were mounted for her, eerily recalled the circumstances nearly two centuries earlier surrounding another Princess of Wales, Charlotte Augusta, in the wake of that princess's untimely death in November 1817. Looking back at that earlier phenomenon through the lens of I997's events reminds us of the stabilizing and even restorative nature of public mourning rituals. In both cases the activities of mourning, while they of course celebrated and memorialized the object of grief, performed a larger social function in enabling the mourners to participate in the actual and symbolic worth (or import) of the object of those activities. Mourning becomes in these circumstances a public performance in which the distinctions normally separating the elite object of mourning from both *the* common individual and "the people" collectively are reduced or even nullified and the mourned individual is fused symbolically with the "common" public. The performance of these rituals of mourning is therefore an inherently democratizing one. Moreover, because so much of this mourning activity involves physical objects and artifacts, it is grounded in—and mediated through—a culture of commodities that is driven by commercial consumerism. In such cases, mourning may then often be seen as a ritualized cultural practice by means of which an individual or a social unit "purchases" the gratification that is the unstated object of its acts of empathetic identification with the particular mourned person.

She was Princess of Wales, a highly visible public figure whose appealing manner and fairy-tale marriage had endeared her to a populace increasingly

weary of a royal family (and royal establishment) upon whose official behaviour they frowned and for whom their affection had eroded in proportion to the increased stresses produced at home by economic instability and class antagonism and abroad by Britain's uncertain place in the emerging new world order. Her sudden and unexpected death shocked and dismayed the nation, and "England's Hope" (as she was often popularly styled) was transformed overnight into "England's Grief." Especially in death, she seemed "the people's princess," as if the nation had collectively taken her not just into their hearts but into their families. Apostrophized widely in the popular culture as "Albion's Rose" (a term of endearment only partially indebted to the emblematic rose denoting her station as Princess of Wales), she was memorialized within days of her death in prose and verse, in song and visual image, and in a remarkable variety of consumer goods. These latter included print materials like memorial cards, "instant" biographies, and poems, lyrics, and sermons; commemorative ceramic and textile goods imprinted with her image; and metalwork and sculptural artifacts produced with astonishing rapidity. Everywhere schemes took shape to commemorate her virtuous life (and death), her domestic charms, her philanthropy, and the promise of benevolent power and influence that death had cruelly truncated. Her funeral, an elaborately scripted, staged, and choreographed affair, occasioned unprecedented outpourings of heartfelt sympathy from the throngs of mourners who lined the route of her funeral procession. It seemed to many that the nation itself had in some sense perished.

The Princess in question was not Diana, Princess of Wales, whose death and public mourning in 1997 I have deliberately tried to suggest in the preceding paragraph without altering the facts. Rather, she was Princess Charlotte Augusta of Wales, granddaughter of George III and the only child of the Prince of Wales. Her wholly unexpected death on 6 November 1817 as a complication of giving birth to a stillborn son plunged the nation into an orgy of mourning—as well as a crisis of royal succession.[1] The Prince of Wales—then serving as Prince Regent while his royal father wandered the hallways of Windsor Castle, blind and mad, until his death in 1820 elevated the Prince to the throne as George IV—would have no other legitimate child, in consequence of his messy public separation from his royal consort, Caroline of Brunswick. Famously unpopular with the general public, the Prince Regent could by late 1817 scarcely venture out without being subjected

to indignities ranging from hisses, groans, and catcalls to hurled potatoes.[2] The disreputable and discredited Caroline, by 1817 already packed off to the Continent and made the subject of elaborate hypocritical inquiries into her conduct, was scarcely more popular—except as she could be paraded physically or symbolically in public or press as a further humiliation to the despised Regent.

Charlotte, on the other hand, was warmly embraced by the British public by 1816, when she married Prince Leopold of Saxe-Cobourg, the uncle of Albert of Saxe-Gotha who later wed Queen Victoria. Perhaps the couple's warm reception was simply a matter of the British public's choosing what today would be called "family values" in preference to the seeming moral vacancy of the ruling members of the royal family. Certainly the model of domestic accord and model citizenship presented by Charlotte and Leopold at their royal villa at Claremont played a large part in the rise in England of the new sort of companionate marital relationships that soon became—at least in principle—the model for the emerging bourgeois family. This paradigm, which assigned the woman the organizing, nurturing function that Coventry Patmore later called "the angel in the house" in counterpoint to the man's role as provider and disciplinarian, seemed in 1817 to promise a less combative domestic arrangement that many hoped would in some manner also domesticate and "civilize" the nation's behaviour and wean it from the appetite for warmaking it had fed for nearly a quarter century following the French Revolution.

The politically unstable climate in England in the years following Waterloo (June 1815) gave rise to growing public disenchantment with the government and its titular leaders as the English increasingly perceived a crippling lack of national direction or priorities in the wake of the great wave of British nationalism that had crested in the later eighteenth century. The populace was therefore naturally eager for some physical sign of hope. They found it, seemingly, in the Princess Charlotte, who was believed to suffer much: she was denied an establishment appropriate to her position as the Regent's only child, frequently banished from his glittering social functions at Carlton House, denied all but minimal contact with her mother, and denied too the friends and confidants any daughter might desire. The people came, not surprisingly, to see in Charlotte's apparent plight a measure of their own, and because unlike both her parents she was attractive physically

and socially, they found it easy to invest her with what we may recognize as essentially mythic qualities that reflected their own aspirations as well as their idealistic nationalistic views of "Englishness": liveliness, extroversion, independence of mind and spirit, and an easy commerce with the public generally. Charlotte seemed to break the prototype of the aloof, elitist royal, crossing the traditional gulf (frequently to the astonishment, embarrassment, and dismay of the elite who wished to preserve that gulf) separating the nobility from the rest of society.

How Princess Charlotte's death in 1817—like Princess Diana's nearly two centuries later—became the occasion for elaborate public rituals of mourning, and how those rituals functioned as public *performances* (often in the wholly theatrical sense which that word suggests), reveals much about the cultural dynamics of the two historical moments. At the same time, the remarkable similarities exhibited in these two sets of mourning performances suggest that some aspects of public mourning change very little with time and circumstance. Indeed, it is their stabilizing and even restorative nature that makes the rituals and performances of mourning so effective and so desirable, not just for the mourners but also for those who stand to benefit most from the sedative effects these ritual performances produce. Thus the various public responses to an event like the princess's death can tell us a great deal about how that public is constituted, about what are the sources and applications of its governing values, and about what are its responses to the changing relationship among the private and family-oriented individual, the politically-conscious public citizen, and the members of the royal establishment, viewed both as symbolic figureheads for the government and as "real people." A traumatic public event like the princess's death provides a dramatic *levelling* of social and societal strata, one that in 1817—and again in 1997—furnished fertile ground for writers, publishers, artists, artisans, and other commercial entrepreneurs across a broad social, political, economic, and intellectual spectrum.

One result of such levelling is a democratizing of experience: the princess is perceived to be also a woman, a woman who falls victim to that most common of Regency women's experiences, death in childbirth. Because people in general (and women in particular) relate immediately to this experience as one that intersects with their own, the shared phenomenon serves also to deuate the otherwise undistinguished, common person. Something

of the same sort occurred in the case of Diana, whose death resulted from the common event of a traffic accident (its extraordinary circumstances notwithstanding). A prominent aspect of the public rituals of mourning involves the transformation of the dead from the status of private individual to public icon. Indeed, the more elevated (and presumably visible) that dead individual happens to be, the more her or his transformation becomes over-coded with mythological status, and the more she or he is consequently invested with the qualities of myth. In the cases of Charlotte and Diana, this mythologizing of history in both personal and public/political terms is apparent in the remarkable profusion of artifacts in all the media that appeared immediately and during the months (and years) following their respective deaths. In 1817, these items, which ranged in price from the very cheap to the very costly, document one of the earliest and most telling examples of the *commodification* for a variously constituted mass audience of historical events and their central figures. The commodification of Diana followed a remarkably similar path in the media-driven modern global community.

Prose works treated the events surrounding Charlotte with great interest. "Historical" works—would-be memoirs, biographies, and the like—manage at once to mythologize *and to politicize* those events. A prose account sold by a radical publisher like William Hone, for instance, relates the "facts" in an entirely different fashion than does one by a pious Tory writer like Thomas Green. Perhaps the most overtly didactic purposes to which the deaths of Charlotte and her child were immediately put are visible in the remarkable number of sermons that were rapidly composed, preached, and published. Chief among the sermonic literature's themes is that of the fragility of human life, coupled with the terrible uncertainty of the human situation, in which one may be plucked suddenly from the comfort and bliss of domestic tranquillity (as particularly epitomized in culturally-sacred tropes of motherhood) by Death. It is no "mere" woman who is thus snatched in this case, though, but the royal princess, key to the royal succession. Deprived at once of the stillborn male heir and the woman who might otherwise be expected to successfully deliver some future heir and/or assume the throne herself, the nation is at once instructed and *chastised*. This latter point was stressed by many authors of sermons who read in Charlotte's death yet another mythic significance: her death became the most terrible of warnings to the nation over its failure as custodian of liberty, freedom, benevolence, and virtue.

Anthologies of extracts from the sermons preached throughout England on the day of Charlotte's funeral and in the days following appeared as well. A good example is Robert Huish's collection, *A Sacred Memorial of the Princess Charlotte Augusta of Saxe Coburg. Saalfeld* (1818), which, in common with the vast quantity of commemorative consumer goods produced on the occasion, capitalized on the general public outpouring of sympathy by connecting the princess's death to the larger universe of human experience, reading it metaphorically as "a link in that vast chain by which thrones, and kingdoms, and nations, are encircled and limited and bound" (vi). This is not to suggest that collections of this sort were without their ulterior motives. In addition to collecting these sermonic extracts, for example, Huish also wrote a long memoir of the princess (*Life and Memoirs*). The copy in the Royal Archives at Windsor Castle includes a letter from Huish to Sir Benjamin Bloomfield, who had presented the Prince Regent with some sort of petition on Huish's behalf.[3] Huish points out in his letter the extent to which he has put his own "spin" (to use the currently fashionable media term) on history so as to support and promote "the Interests and Dignity of the royal Family." In short, Huish painted a flattering picture of the Regent and his circle precisely because (as the linkage of events in Huish's letter makes clear) it was in his personal interest to do so. Others used Charlotte's death for more avowedly political purposes: a particularly remarkable example is P.B. Shelley's *Address to the People on the Death of the Princess Charlotte*, composed rapidly in two days and linking Charlotte's death with the executions of the Derbyshire rebels Brandreth, Ludlam, and Turner (victims of government entrapment) in a rhetorical *tour de force* culminating in an apocalyptic transformation that metamorphoses Charlotte in the figure of an entirely different princess, Liberty, whose death and implied resurrection conclude the essay. In both these instances, the authors manipulate the emotions *and the intellects* of individual readers whose interest in the facts and circumstances of Charlotte's death provided fertile ground for the cultivation of favour or special interest. Central to this transaction with the audience—whether it be Huish's letter to the Prince Regent or a clergyman's sermon to his congregation or Shelley's radically subversive political pamphlet—is the appeal to *shared* experience, that makes the rituals of mourning so cathartic. Your loss is my loss and my loss is your loss, the public performance of the ritual implies; more important, it is our loss and it therefore unites us in and through this performance.

Indeed, it is the *performance* of the mourning ritual, more so than the mere reflection on the person or qualities of the dead individual, that activates the peculiar sedative function of mourning.

The greatest quantity of responses to Charlotte's death took the form of commemorative poems that number into the hundreds in surviving copies and that appeared in the periodical press, in slim volumes, on broadsheets, and as memorial cards and other devices intended for purchase by even the poorest members of society who were assumed (correctly, it appears) to be willing to part with a penny or two for a memento of the dead princess. Their modest investment inserted these humble purchasers into the general community of sentiment, sympathy, and suffering whose individual social, economic, political, religious, and class differences were for the most part transcended through their joint participation in the shared consumer activity of public mourning. This, too, involves a sedative effect, in that it is naturally more difficult to maintain one's antipathy—however justified and longstanding it may be—to another whose grief (and ritualized mourning) so clearly parallels one's own. This is one reason why the Prince Regent was not averse to the elaborate staging involved with Charlotte's funeral procession at Windsor, a performance that involved a torchlight procession attended by throngs of spectators/mourners. Whatever their ill will toward to Regent (and his unsteady government), their own participation in this public performance unavoidably made them *de facto* co-mourners with the Regent, the royal establishment, and the nation as a whole. Of course, the Prince Regent—foolish, but no fool—appreciated this fact and willingly capitalized in just this fashion on the death of his only child.

The memorial poetry occasioned by Charlotte's death takes several forms. Some treat the princess's death as at once a national catastrophe and a powerful warning to England. As in the sermonic literature, this warning is multifaceted: admonition for perhaps celebrating too well—and feeling too secure—in the aftermath of Waterloo, *memento mori*, and commemoration of the personal and public virtues embodied both in the actual person of the princess and in the image of her that had been fostered among the public. In the poems, the dead princess is repeatedly represented in what quickly come to be stock images like the rose—nipped in the bud or, more often, severed from its stem, along with a bud emblematic of her stillborn son—or a star in the night sky (alluding at once to her place in heaven and her

nighttime death). Widely apostrophized as "Rose of England," Charlotte is also "England's (or Britannia's) Hope," now blasted—like the people's hopes with which she had been popularly identified—by her sudden and unexpected death.[4]

As has happened in the past several years with details that have been related in competing authorized and unauthorized biographies of Princess Diana, the element of competition among authors to outdo one another in their tributes to Princess Charlotte also contributed to the creation of myth. Many "prize poems," for instance, resulted from competitions on the subject of her death (as had been the case also with her marriage the previous year). Inevitably, poets drew ever more ambitious rhetorical and figurative pictures of Charlotte, her life, and her national significance, linking her with the conventions of "high" art including the epic and, perhaps surprisingly, the pastoral (drawing upon details of her married life at the royal couple's home, Claremont). These poets invested Charlotte with the symbolic, allegorical, and mythic attributes associated with the epic and pastoral traditions, in the process merging artistic and mythologic/iconographic tropes and traditions with temporal public events.

The range of sentiment expressed—and the range of readerships addressed— in the poems on Charlotte's death are reflected also in the postures assumed by their real and invented authors, which range from clergymen and university dons and students, through public figures of one sort or another, to poets who identified themselves variously as "an old seaman," "a shepherd," or the ubiquitous "A Lady." At the same time, the titles of many of these poems betray their didactic intent, as is apparent from titles such as "The Princess's Tomb: A Dialogue for the Nursery" or "Hymn, sung at the Asylum for Female Orphans." Over and over, poems dwell on the theme of greatness missed, of hopes dashed, of promise abruptly truncated:

> Could wisdom soar through time's domain [,]
> Know what will be, and what had been,
> Had Charlotte liv'd to sway;
> How chang'd would find the course of things,
> The fates of Kingdoms and of Kings,
> Fix'd on her mortal day[.]
>
> (H. *C. Elegy* I. 30-35)

The common thread in all such elegiac discourse is that the princess is irreplaceable, and that her death leaves the world irreversibly diminished. This concentration of signification in the persons of a few public luminaries reflects an important shift in eighteenth-century European thinking about affectivity. Previously, affectivity—the power to express, or to generate expressions of, powerful feeling—was diffused widely among members of society, whereas by the early nineteenth century that affectivity was coming to be concentrated on a few select individuals, who were consequently regarded as "exceptional, irreplaceable, and inseparable" (Aries 472). In this respect, as in many others, the responses to Princess Charlotte's death are strikingly reliable indicators of significant changes at work in the cultural dynamic of a nation—and a national consciousness—that was undergoing a self-refashioning in the wake of both the Enlightenment and the destabilizing social, political, and technological revolutions to which it gave birth.

One poem that was frequently quoted and excerpted in print was Sincere *Burst of Feeling!*, which was also broken up into three sections when it was included in one of the major anthologies of memorial poetry, John Gwilliam's *A Cypress Wreath*, where the thirteen-page poem is called "a little piece of great poetic merit" (100).[5] The poem, which comprises eight stanzas of various length filled with exclamation points, proceeds in three movements, each beginning with the apostrophe "Daughter of Joy!" The first movement, which explicitly links Charlotte's marriage and her death, features rhetorical questions of the sort common to the memorial poems: "Hath Hymen dug, alas! thy tomb, / And widowed COBURG's Princely bed?" "Is CHARLOTTE dead?" (5) Rejecting those poets who would memorialize Charlotte for "venal passion" (hence the title's declaration that this poem is a *sincere* — not a merely opportunistic—effusion), the speaker observes that "Poesy's a sorry thing, / Unless inspired from Heaven!" and calls therefore for a Muse to "touch the Lyre with seraph-might, / In soothing condolence!" or, in order to assuage grief temporarily, to "tell how Rapture paused awhile, / Till Beauty grac'd the Throne!" (7):

> For she was sprung of Royal Blood,
> And more than Royal mind!
> With heavenly excellence endued,
> That gloried to be kind!

In Charlotte's widely reputed kindness ("Delighting to do good!"), the speaker emphasizes one of the many domestic virtues for which Charlotte is made to stand in the memorial testaments. Moreover, the poem quickly shifts to the royal couple's domestic bliss, which the public had found so attractive:

Then pure felicity for Them
Had still increasing charms—
For Home was both the Diadem,
And motto of their Arms! (9)

But the end of the first movement marks the death first of "CHARLOTTE'S Son" and then of the "Hope" that had been left behind in her briefly surviving body, "leaving none / To chear [sic] the Patriot mind!" (10). In thus rhetorically fusing the speaker's mourning posture with a patriotic impulse, the author implies that just as Charlotte's role was both domestic (private) and national (public), so is the performance of grieving both individual (private) and communal (public) and therefore equally patriotic.

The second movement again presents the princess's public attributes within the context of her personal and matrimonial qualities:

Daughter of Joy! With Spirit pure,
And beauteous royal Form -Thy
loveliness might not endure
Affection's tender storm!

And LEOPOLD was thy maiden choice -
Unbiassed by controul:
He shunned with thee unmeaning toys,
For Sympathy of Soul[.] (11-12)

Here are only thinly veiled references to Charlotte's earlier notorious (and publicly popular) rejection of the marriage with the young Prince of Orange her father had attempted to arrange, as well as to the couple's lack of interest in the ostentation and "toys" popularly associated with the Prince

Regent and his circle. From here it is only a short step to a passage that demonstrates the levelling effect I have already mentioned upon people whose social status is entirely unlike Charlotte's but whose experience as human beings is wholly comparable:

For Sympathy the Soul hath bound
In universal woe; — The haughty, meek,
obscure, renowned,
One face of feeling show.
The matron, while her sorrows flow,
With intermittent sigh—
Bewails, a Mother thus should go
On giving birth to vanished joy!
And maiden beauty there is seen
To dread the troth she gave—
And weep how short a space between
The Altar and the Grave! (14-15)

This movement then concludes with the assembled mourners committing the dead princess to her grave; trusting in God and in the salvation "promised to the Just" by his Son, they pray,

"And with such Hope in MERCY'S Throne, We
yield this virtuous, blessed ONE, With sorrow to
the dust!" (16)

The final, and briefest, movement (a single stanza), is at once retrospective and predictive:

...what avails Devotion's tear On lost
Affection's awful bier! Thy MEMORY
will live for ever— In other hearts than
those of favour; For fondness will the
theme prolong In tender tale, and
plaintive song. (17)

Note the significant point made here about who will keep alive the memory of the princess and the values *for which she stood*: those who are "out of favour" and whose art forms are the "tale" (i.e., oral literature) and the "song" (another medium still associated particularly with the common people). In other words, she will be—in her death, in the rituals of mourning, and in the hearts of her mourners—the *people's* princess, just as work after work had styled her as "A Nation's Hope" (5). This point is underscored in dramatic fashion in the poem's concluding lines. Referring to his (or her) own inspiring Muse, the speaker exclaims:

> She [the Muse] gloried in thy Spirit high,
> With all a Freeman's ecstacy!
> And poured this tributary theme
> With all a Patriot's pure esteem –
> Lamenting much, with all forlorn,
> Thy Death, in Beauty's blooming morn
> She drops the pen, most truly Thine,
> THOU FAIREST, FADED HOPE OF BRUNSWICK'S ROYAL LINE! (18)

The pointed linkage of terms like "Freeman" and Patriot" here at the end, in such a prominent position, gives a powerful political and social charge to the poem's conclusion. It renders the entire poem—and the consolidated consciousness of the implied community of mourners who participate in its sentiments through their individual and collective acts of reading and therefore of "performance"—very much a populist manifesto. In this poem, as in so many other literary and extra-literary artifacts that were produced on the occasion, there is an implied democratization at work, one that appropriates the princess, her life, her experience, and her symbolic significance for the majority of the populace rather than for the elite coterie ("other hearts than those of favour") at the same time that it extends to her the eminently human, domestic values which that majority embraces and which differentiate her (and them) from the despised court society whose misshapen values her presence served to emphasize.

While there is of course much bad verse among the many tributes to Princess Charlotte from authors who are today largely unknown to us, there exist nevertheless poems of real accomplishment, poems that are interesting technically as well as intellectually, poems whose sincerity and eloquence transcend the seemingly exhausted rhetoric and the figuration of postured sentimentality and exaggerated grief. It is worth noting, too, that publicly visible poets like Anna Letitia Barbauld, Leigh Hunt, Felicia Hemans, and Robert Southey published noteworthy poems on the occasion, while others like Byron incorporated Charlotte's life and death into poems on quite other subjects (like Canto IV of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*). Because memorial poems were so numerous, and because they continually reworked familiar iconographic and rhetorical tropes, they inevitably began to have about them the repetitiveness of ritual expression, which helps to explain how and why they reflected the immediate cultural response to Charlotte's death even as they inevitably helped to shape that response. And, of course, all this reiteration served a performative function in that the reading activity itself produced for the readers a sedative and restorative stability, with each reiteration (and variation) augmenting the consoling, communitarian nature of a shared activity, even when that activity was carried out in physical privacy.

Treatments of the death of Princess Charlotte in the extra-literary arts—including the decorative arts—offer other interesting opportunities to examine the cultural diffusion of a popular mythology as part of the public performance of the rituals of mourning. Of particular interest are visual works intended for popular consumption. The many memorial paintings, drawings, and engravings that followed Charlotte's death build upon a tradition of portraiture that included the iconographically interesting early portrait of the infant Charlotte by Richard Cosway (engraved by Bartolozzi and published in May 1797) and the delightful portrait of the young Charlotte by Sir Thomas Lawrence (1806). Of course, the memorial prints emphasize what is inherent also in the literary works, and what is epitomized in the two-line inscription on Richard Corbould's 1817 engraving:

> She was a nation's hope—a nation's pride;
> With her that pride has fled—those hopes have died!

Corbould's engraving features a disconsolate Britannia weeping over Charlotte's tomb and funerary urn, surrounded by suggestive iconographic details that include her shield and helmet and *a*. lily, while above her hovers a rose-garlanded bust-portrait of Charlotte, surmounted with a halo-like

ring of stars from which light radiates downward. Still more extravagant commemorative engravings exist, like the Apotheosis by "Lieutenant Read" (1818) whose iconographic program was explicated by a printed key. In other prints both the pose of Charlotte and her child and the iconography of the scene are unmistakably indebted to the Renaissance visual tradition of (Roman Catholic!) Madonnas. In drawing in this fashion upon a visual tradition for their central image, they injected into the Charlotte mythology yet another element that conferred upon her at least an allusive relationship with the Mother of God—a point that, despite its religious heterodoxy—was not without political significance for nationalistic British citizens who had grown accustomed to regarding themselves in terms of the New Israel.[6] Moreover, in creating these images intended for public circulation rather than for wholly private consumption, producers of these goods kept in the public view both the object of the mourning and the performative aspects of the mourning rite. A modern analogy exists in the many postage stamps commemorating Princess Diana; while many of these are of course aimed purely at private stamp collectors, the many such stamps that enter the mail serve to keep alive the image(s) of—and therefore the process of mourning for—the perished princess.

Charlotte was also depicted on many other sorts of consumer goods, from transfer-printed ceramic pieces (like tea services) to commemorative coins, textiles (printed scarves and ribbons were especially popular, the Regency counterparts to silk-screened Princess Diana T-shirts and the like), and sculptures like the lavish monument at St. George's Chapel, Windsor, which was financed by individual subscriptions of no more than a pound and whose installation in the relatively inaccessible chapel at Windsor angered the subscribers (who may have been "paid off" in the form of rather unsatisfactory engravings of the sculpture installed in situ). That many of these commemorative items were also produced in forms which the general public could readily afford further reinforced the sense among the people that the princess was "one of them" in a way that her father could not—and would not—be; in possessing commemorative items they seemed to possess her, in a manner analogous to the way in which the auditors of the classical epic came to "possess" the epic hero and his or her cultural significance by virtue of the simple fact of their listening to the epic poet's song. In the process of thus "possessing" Charlotte, the people found that

they gained also a measure of dignity; this was perhaps particularly so for the women, whose proximity to Charlotte's experience was inevitably reinforced by the memorial items.

As one examines the extraordinary wave of myth-making that attended Charlotte's public life and death in various segments of Regency English culture, one begins better to appreciate the intellectual, spiritual, and cultural impulses that drive the mythologizing of a popular subject through the rituals of public mourning in times of domestic instability and crisis. One comes, too, more clearly to recognize the public function of popular mythology, which overlays the events of history with additional layers of theatricality (or "performance" and spectacle), ritual behaviour, and moral and spiritual earnestness. This theatricality is readily apparent. Over and over the death of the princess is "staged," for instance, as a melodramatic deathbed conversation in which the young princess admonishes her dashing young husband, Prince Leopold (who was not in fact present when she died) to bear his loss with fortitude and to play his appropriate role in this great moral drama. The heart-wrenching (or heart-numbing) sentimental excesses that typify these deathbed scenes are directly related both to the rising popularity in British theatre of melodrama (especially the domestic sort) and to the overt theatricality of Regency culture generally as we see it reflected in figures like Beau Brummell, Lord Byron, Lady Caroline Lamb, and of course the Prince Regent himself. But we need to consider also the growing cultural value placed upon "the domestic virtues."

In the "domestic virtues" which the public increasingly associated with Charlotte; in the "romantic" nature of her storybook marriage to Leopold of Saxe-Coburg; in the couple's serene retirement to rural domesticity at Claremont (whence she might emerge to distribute bibles or to express concern for local children); and in her pregnancy and imminent motherhood the public glimpsed a reaffirmation of life and domesticity not unlike what late twentieth-century culture has called (not without trouble) "family values" or "traditional values," and which was already in 1817 becoming central to the emerging bourgeois family ethic that would form so large a portion of Victorian culture.[7] The happy union, played out both in the Edenic confines of their retreat at Claremont and in the popular mythology of the press and the popular arts, presented the British people with an alternative to the excesses of the Prince Regent and his circle epitomized in his

fantastic Royal Pavilion at Brighton, his luxurious existence at Carlton House (while his poor mad father walked the halls and terraces of Windsor), and his own spectacularly failed marriage. Charlotte's pregnancy, which was followed eagerly in the press, brought her nearer both the sentimental hearts of the people and the actual experience of British women generally. Her wholly unexpected death was devastating, both to the hope that had been constructed around her figure and to the associated sentimental mythology that had been generated—in no small part at the prompting, even the deliberate manipulation, of those who had already recognized the potential for profit that lay in the commodification of the princess.

The dead princess is presented repeatedly in poetry and prose as a moral exemplar. But the significance of her exemplary life is magnified by the fact that she was not just a woman but also the princess and the woman who might be queen. Indeed, it was in this double role that Princess Charlotte came to bear such significance—*and such symbolic utility*—for writers and rhetoricians of all parties. The astonishing focus on the domestic details of her life and death, and in particular the emphasis on her marriage, her pregnancy, and her death specifically in childbirth, help us now, at the distance of nearly two centuries, to recognize in the public treatment of her experience the beginnings of an ideology of woman and of family that would become the defining one for Victorian and post-Victorian England—and indeed for much of Western culture generally. In his introductory remarks in *A Sacred Memorial of the Princess Charlotte Augusta of Saxe Coburg Saalfeld*, Huish locates in the person of the princess "an epitome of all the virtues that could adorn the woman, or the Christian" (iv) and it is appropriate to observe the rhetorical structuring of his comment. For while the ostensible focus of the sentence in which these words appear is the figure of Charlotte, their position at the very end of a long and much-modified sentence gives them the added rhetorical force of summation and culmination. Significantly, it is not in her public role as princess that Charlotte is last seen here, but rather in her *rhetorical function* as "epitome" of all those virtues. Moreover, the rhetorical structure of the sentence directs us not to Charlotte herself but rather to "the woman" and "the Christian." In other words, Huish's rhetoric is directed less toward Charlotte than toward the reader, who is provided in these introductory remarks with a sort of ideological "filter" through which to pass the excerpts that make up the body of

Huish's anthology. Huish is, in effect, invoking both the dead princess and her pious eulogists in the construction of a new ideological model of the feminine, of woman.

Indeed, deflecting the mourner's attention away from the physical reality of the dead princess's body and instead toward her abstract, emblematic attributes is entirely consistent with western attitudes toward the death of women. As Elisabeth Bronfen has observed, because the fear of death is so strong in European culture, the physical corpse—especially of a woman—has largely been made a taboo, so that any depiction of female death is fraught with contradictions, not the least of which is the frequent recurrence of "narratives about experiences of the sublime at the sight of a corpse." Bronfen locates the resolution to this contradiction in an important shift in aesthetics that becomes apparent during the Romantic period in England, when the artist (or indeed the public memorialist generally) draws on the "fact" of the dead beloved for the inspiration that leads to the production of a "textual copy of the beloved" that provides a vicarious experience for artist and audience alike while at the same time creating a psychological and aesthetic distance between the spectator's experience and the physical, bodily reality of the dead princess (60, 365).

In his prefatory remarks, Huish goes on to stress "the personal character, and the domestic virtues of the amiable and beloved object of our regard" (iv). The language Huish uses here specifically casts Charlotte as "viewed object," as the object of a universal cultural gaze that at once objectifies and consumes her by translating her personal (or physical) being into a set of abstractions that are then categorized and prioritized by the very language Huish himself employs. This phenomenon strikingly anticipates Bronfen's point that "what is plainly visible—the beautiful feminine corpse—also stands in for something else" (xi) so that in a paradoxical fashion we are enabled to "read" in the visible that which is not visible. Indeed, remarkably little of the writing that appeared after her death really focuses on her actual private, personal character, however many the details and anecdotes about Charlotte that it includes. Rather, and especially in the sermons, this writing consistently uses personal details as points of departure for observations and exhortations that have more to do with defining and directing the social (or societal) character of English readers and the collective national character of English citizens. Moreover, Huish's word,

"amiable"—a word that recurs countless times in both the titles and the main texts of sermons, poems, and other written memorials—ascribes to Charlotte both a pliability and an attractiveness of character that is not entirely in keeping with facts.

To some, Charlotte may indeed have been amiable, but to others she was headstrong, opinionated, and transgressive. Wellington, for instance, regarded her death as "a blessing to the country," and Lord Holland had accused her of "a love of exaggeration, if not a disregard of truth [and] a passion for talebearers and favourites" (Hibbert 102). Therefore, for Huish to render her "amiable" by means of language was to subjugate and "civilize" her (and her behaviour) for rhetorical purposes. This was, after all, an age not much inclined to respect or admire eccentricity and fierce independence in the women it cast as its objects of regard or affection. Wild eccentrics like Caroline of Brunswick (or Lady Caroline Lamb, for that matter) may have held a certain charm for a public appreciative of oppo-sitional spectacle, as the Queen Caroline affair would demonstrate, but that public tended not to install such images of womanhood in its common estimate of the domestic circle—as wife, as mother, as sister, or as daughter.

Further still, the princess's public function as icon is made manifest here and elsewhere in the use of telling phrases like Huish's reference to her as the "beloved *object* of our regard" (my emphasis). For one thing, the expression denotes a one-way street: regarded by the public gaze, the princess is herself rendered silent, objectified, depersonalized. Only in words, in images, in rhetoric, and in the myth that is being manufactured by those intent upon commodifying her, is Charlotte kept "alive." And anything that she may have to "say"—any "speaking" that she may do—is ventriloquistic subterfuge: it is the voice of others who attribute a form of "speech" to her in the guise of actions and significations which they themselves assign to her dead body and her living image.

Hence the significance of Huish's remark that "the character of this illustrious and virtuous Female should be handed down, as the brightest pattern of moral excellence, of conjugal affection, and of strict conformity to the dictates of her God" (v). Huish refers not to the princess (nor does the remainder of the paragraph contain any such reference) but to the generalized and capitalized "Female," who is exhibited, seriatim, as an exemplar of "moral excellence," proper wifely behaviour, and absolute obedience

to authority. These traits would come in the Victorian period to be precisely those that characterized the exemplary "angel in the house" as the dominant patriarchal culture would define them and as they would be objectified in the arts, in the home, and in more broadly public social and political institutions.

The cultural needs that encourage and nurture popular mythologies of the sort that sprang up around Princess Charlotte are grounded in personal needs that govern the hopes and aspirations of individuals in their personal, often isolated and alienated, lives. These needs are projected in the form of public cultural idols that are then invested with characteristics that reflect those of the private individuals themselves. The public figures play out, at the level of popular myth, the largely unrealized desires and aspirations of the public(s) to whom the avenues to power, influence, heightened experience, and adventure are largely closed. At the same time, in the misfortunes, reversals, and even the deaths of those public icons, the private individuals are able to trace the lines of their own experiences and in the process draw comfort from the narrowing of the gap that separates the mythic figure from the mortal individual. Paradoxically, the result is that both are dignified and valorized by the process. This is one reason why the exercises of mourning for Princess Diana that received such prominent coverage in the media in 1997 were both so widespread and so seemingly spontaneous. Studying the circumstances of Princess Charlotte's life and death nearly two centuries ago helps us appreciate more fully why this is so and, in the process, enables us better to understand both the continuing cultural impulse to mythologize historical phenomena and the diverse but inextricably interrelated contexts in which that mythologizing activity occurs within the formalized public performances of the rituals of mourning.

THE PARALLELS BETWEEN the exercises of public mourning for these two princesses are indeed many. When John F. Kennedy was assassinated in 1963, cultural historians and popular journalists alike itemized numerous parallels with the assassination of Abraham Lincoln almost exactly a century earlier: Both presidents were killed by shots to the head, each was succeeded in office by a man named Johnson, etc. History, it would

seem, does indeed have an eerie way of repeating itself. In the cases of the Princesses Charlotte and Diana, their deaths were followed by public mourning that included sharp criticism of the Royal Family, who were in each case criticized for apparent failures to appreciate, respect, and nurture the young princess properly. In each case loud public outcries accompanied the apparent miscarriage of official plans for appropriate public memorials: each princess was promised an easily accessible public monument (for which individual small contributions were solicited and accepted) and yet the principal memorial was in each case appropriated by the princess's family and erected in that family's private space. The circumstances of the two deaths were of course worlds apart: one died early in a happy marriage as a result of unanticipated complications of childbirth, while the other's death followed her marriage's failure and her own breakneck midnight attempt to outrun the relentless paparazzi. Oddly, the widespread public grieving proved in each case to be comparatively short-lived. By 1819 England was on to other, more pressing domestic crises that culminated (politically) in August 1819 in the "Manchester Massacre" (or "Peterloo") and, soon afterward, the death of George III in January 1820 and the carnivalesque spectacle of the attempted return of "Queen Caroline" for George IV's coronation in July 1821. Post-Diana Britain also moved on fairly soon to other matters: Northern Ireland remained unresolved, the nation became involved militarily in places like Bosnia, celebrations (and then mourning) for the Queen Mum transpired, and Elizabeth II celebrated historic milestones and made peace with the public concerning Diana. Perhaps it was their very *popularity*—their immediate and palpable connection to *ordinary* citizens—that ensured the relatively rapid passing of the two princesses from the front page. Even as the twenty-first century dawns uncertainly, the general populace—and their cultural icons—continue to observe history more from the sidelines than from the forefront.

NOTES

i. The commodification of the dead princess has not until recently been sufficiently appreciated, either by traditional historians or by contemporary cultural historians. Esther Schor's discussion in *Bearing the Dead: The British Culture of Mouming from the Enlightenment to Victoria* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1996) goes farther than even the several modern biographies of Charlotte—see Thea Holme, *Prinny's Daughter* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1976); Alison Plowden, *Caroline and Charlotte: The Regent's Wife and Daughter*, 1795-1821 (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1989)—and members of her family, but Charlotte still receives only a chapter's notice there, and Schor's focus is largely upon the verbal arts. For the fullest discussion of the subject see Stephen C. Behrendt, *Royal Mourning and Regency Culture: Elegies and Memorials of Princess Charlotte* (London: Macmillan, 1997).

2. Marc Baer discusses the potato incident in his introduction to *Theatre and Disorder in Late Georgian London* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992). Though its subject is seemingly distant from that of the present essay, Baer's study of the performative theatricality of public group behaviour during the Regency offers an interesting analogy to the group behaviour that is explored in what follows here.

3. The letter quoted here is inserted in the Royal Archives copy at Windsor Castle, classification number III 3 D /10525223.

4. See the dramatic visual presentation of this metaphor in the memorial print by P.W. Tompkins, *The Royal Rose*. Inscribed "London. Published Dec. 16, 1817, by P.W. Tompkins, 53, New Bond Street." In the inscription at the bottom of the print, Tompkins (who is credited with engraving the print "from the life by Henning") is called "Engraver to Her Majesty." A copy of this print is in the Royal Archives at Windsor Castle.

5. Although the tide page of *A Cypress Wreath* furnishes no author's name, I have attributed the collection to Gwilliam because many of the poems in the volume are identified with his name and because he is also the only poet whose name is mentioned prominently on the tide page. This volume is not to be confused with one that was roughly contemporary, *The Cypress Wreath*.

6. On the currency of this notion, see Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation*, 1707-1837 (New Haven: Yale UP, 1992).

7. Indeed, already in 1812 Felicia Hemans, the poet whose works would unfortunately become inextricably linked by many of her contemporaries and successors with the very essence of what were purported to be women's sentiments (indeed with woman's very soul), had published a volume bearing the telling tide of *The Domestic Affections* (London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1812).