

Out of Their Orbit

Celebrities and Eccentrics in Nineteenth-Century France

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What do you call a woman who sleeps in a coffin and keeps a pet alligator? Or a woman who harbors two lions in her backyard? In the nineteenth century, such a woman was called an “eccentric.” Two such French eccentrics were Rosa Bonheur (1822–1899) (fig. 3.1) and Sarah Bernhardt (1844–1923) (fig. 3.2). Rosa Bonheur enjoyed international renown as a painter of animals, most famously *The Horse Fair* in 1853. She was the most recognized woman painter of her day, and the first French woman to receive the *Légion d’honneur*.¹ Like Bonheur, Sarah Bernhardt was an international celebrity. Besides bringing Paris to its feet in such plays as *Cleopatra* and *Hamlet*, the actress opened her own Parisian theater, where she acted and produced when she was not touring. By the 1890s, Bernhardt had become far more than an actress: she was also “the Bernhardt,” *la Divine*, arguably the most famous woman in the world.

These two women distinguished themselves by establishing reputations as eccentrics as well as celebrities. Bonheur attracted attention as an *excentrique* in the 1850s by jaunting about Paris astride a horse in trousers and a jacket. Men of position scheduled to rendezvous with her in the Bois de Boulogne took one look and galloped off in the opposite direction.² Bonheur also attracted gossip by keeping an entire menagerie of animals in her back yard, including lions, almost forty sheep, goats, horses, oxen, mules, and a wild boar. Similarly, a wide range of contemporaries saw Bernhardt “as always in love with eccentricity.”³ “Scour the annals of the theatrical arts,” dared the drama critic Francisque Sarcey, “you will never again see as strange a spectacle as this turbulent, treacherous life.”⁴ Like Bonheur, Bernhardt was fond of large beasts such as pumas and alligators, and gave them the free run of her



FIGURE 3.1. Rosa Bonheur and her lion Fatma

home on the Boulevard Péreire in Paris. The actress was also known to eschew a bed as her sleeping place in favor of a coffin (fig. 3.3).⁵

Bonheur and Bernhardt were among the most celebrated of women in nineteenth-century European society. It was no coincidence, I will argue, that both women established reputations for being eccentric. To do so, both built upon their professional status as artists, and exploited the new media technologies of their era. Their embrace of eccentricity as a personal style helped them to manage their fame; it represented some acknowledgement on their part that as female celebrities, they had become culturally unintelligible to their public. Celebrity in the nineteenth century assumed the recognition of individual self-achievement, and necessitated unprecedented levels of visibility, publicity, and exposure.⁶ According to Lenard Berlanstein, because the female role was to dwell in the private realm and to be barely seen, let alone heard, “constructing celebrity status for men” was “infinitely easier than for women.” In other words, celebrity challenged the notion of female self-abnegation inscribed in the dominant bourgeois domestic ideal.⁷ As we shall see, Bonheur and Bernhardt dealt with this “problem” of female celebrity by *playing* with their cultural illegibility. Embracing precisely their strangeness



FIGURE 3.2. Sarah Bernhardt in *L'Aiglon*

as women, they became eccentric, transforming their unconventionality into something amusing and idiosyncratic.

As eccentrics, Bonheur and Bernhardt could not be held responsible for their actions, a fact that was key to the success of their image. Both women presented themselves as “victims” of the celebrity surrounding them. Bernhardt, in particular, made herself out to be the hapless prey of the reporter, whom she condemned as “a veritable dung-beetle.”⁸ “Since the very creation of reporters,” she wrote with her usual flair for understatement, “there is no person on this earth who has suffered as much from them as I did on my first tour.”⁹ By portraying herself as a casualty of the press, Bernhardt disavowed authorship of her own eccentric image. Such a denial was crucial to the credibility of the eccentric *qua* eccentric, since the behavior was not supposed to be intentional. Bonheur and Bernhardt had to appear to do weird things out of whim or instinct



FIGURE 3.3. Sarah Bernhardt in her coffin

rather than conscious intent. In this way, they could not be held accountable for their actions. As creative artists, both women sought lives that were inventive and unscripted. The particular brand of blamelessness they gained through eccentric behavior made their lives more livable precisely in these terms.

Bernhardt led a scandalous life, which hardly needs rehearsing here: she engaged in prostitution as a young child, bore an illegitimate child, had one brief, disastrous marriage, and counted lovers by the dozen. And yet, with the exception of her anti-Semitic enemies, she was prized by the vast majority of French people, who viewed her as maddeningly fickle, but ultimately adorable—an artist who led her life “up so high” that she could not be judged by normal standards. Bonheur enjoyed the same blamelessness of the eccentric. Like Bernhardt, she was hardly a model of the domestic feminine. Women artists were dismissed as “unnatural” besides entirely lacking in talent. In addition, Bonheur shunned marriage and lived openly with two women—the first, an inventor, and the second, an American from San Francisco who was

half her age. In an era when no woman dared put a cigarette to her mouth, she was a chain-smoker. And yet Bonheur was “forgiven” because of her eccentricity. While some critics singled out Bonheur’s so-called masculine face as a warning to women seeking an art career, there were many more who, as Tamar Garb has put it, “indulged her personal whims by dwelling on their eccentricity, their very oddness.”¹⁰ Again, tolerance sprang from the general view that an eccentric could not be blamed for her behavior, which was beyond individual intent or will.

By using the technologies of celebrity (newsprint, photography, magazine copy) to market themselves as eccentrics, these two women not only managed their fame, but also, notably, got away with mortal sins against true womanhood. How can we understand this immunity in a society notorious for its restrictions on female behavior? Because eccentric behavior was not taken seriously in the nineteenth century, historians have largely disregarded it as well.¹¹ My aim in this essay is to question the putative innocence of eccentricity. What were the politics of eccentricity? How did eccentricity figure in the efforts of women to sustain an imaginative relation to gender norms in the nineteenth century? Historians have devoted enormous attention to nineteenth-century gender norms, regarding them as a contested but relatively stable set of ideals and practices controlling the terms “male” and “female” during this period. Such norms, historians have argued, were either enacted or rejected by women in their social behavior. The eccentricity of Bonheur and Bernhardt reveals the overly mechanistic way in which we have understood “resistance” to gender norms. Not only did individual women maintain infinitely variable relations to such norms, thus defying the notion of the “normal,” but they also produced these norms even as they challenged them.¹² On one level, Bonheur and Bernhardt appear to have used their eccentricity to escape preexisting normative “rules.” But such an argument overlooks the fact that eccentricity could not be understood without reference to convention or normality. As such, eccentricity reinforced as well as challenged the stability of norms. The purpose of this article, then, is not only to examine how Bonheur and Bernhardt as “rebel” eccentrics managed to trip up the nineteenth-century gender system, but more importantly, to complicate our understanding of how individual women sustained a creative relation to gender norms.

In being dubbed eccentrics, Bonheur and Bernhardt represented a new breed. For although human beings have exhibited strange behavior since the beginning of time, the very notion of the eccentric individual did not exist in Western societies before the modern era. Up until the eighteenth century, there were eccentric stars but not yet eccentric persons. In fact, “eccentric” had no figurative meaning at all until 1685, when an English poet, in comparing a human to a star, used the metaphor of “the brightest, yet the most ex-

trick Soul.”¹³ Originally “eccentric” was an astronomical term which referred to a planet whose axis was other than centrally placed. Stars in eccentric orbit felt the pull of gravity from other stars as well as the one they were orbiting. As a result, their paths diverged from a normal ellipse or circle; an eccentric orbit followed an arc that was remote from where it was supposed to be. Eccentricity was about location, measured precisely by its aberration from a normal orbit. It was produced by and served as an index of normality.

The figurative meaning of eccentric as “odd and whimsical” gained strength in England during the eighteenth century, crossed the Channel to France in 1817, and from there traveled to Germany in the 1830s. Even then, one could still not be an *excentrique* as a type until the 1840s.¹⁴ In the 1850s, however, the word became fabulously *chic*. French writers flocked to variants of the word *excentrique*, including some of the most rebellious French women of the early nineteenth century.¹⁵ It was Germaine de Staël, for example, who introduced the figurative term “eccentric” to French readers in 1817. In addition, the novelist George Sand used it in record numbers in her 1855 autobiography, *Journal de ma vie*, in order to describe her penchant for “walking away from every convention in the world,” including her habit of wearing a male suit.¹⁶ From its very invention, eccentricity bore a special relationship to the female gender. In the earliest English usages of the term, eccentric behavior in women became synonymous with the transgression of gender norms. In the *Common Sense* of 1737, for example, women were described as “confined within the narrow limits of Domestic Offices, and when they stray beyond them, they move excentrically, and consequently without Grace.”¹⁷

Eccentricity as a mode of behavior was thus “invented” in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. It coincides, then, with the emergence of a bourgeois democratic state in France. This chronology makes sense if we consider that eccentricity is grounded in individualism—the central value of liberal society—and can be defined as a kind of hyper-individualism. To use the astronomical idiom, the eccentric feels the gravitational pull of some contrary, singular force moving her into another orbit. An eccentric person, like an eccentric orbit, was located somewhere other than where she was supposed to be, and thus indexed normative behavior. Still another figurative meaning of eccentric was “regulated by no central control.”¹⁸ Clearly, eccentricity was a product of the normative society that distinguished modern liberal culture. In recent years, historians have closely linked the consolidation of liberal society with the emergence of such “disciplinary regimes” as medicine, psychology, sexology, and criminology. Through such “disciplines,” they argue, professionals began to regulate a variety of human behaviors—sexual activity, personal and public hygiene, workplace conduct, familial relations.