

# Dead famous: Research says 18th century obituaries sparked modern cult of celebrity

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Research by the University of Warwick shows how death gave birth to the modern cult of celebrity as the sudden rise in the popularity of obituaries of unusual people in the 1700s provided people with the 18th Century equivalent of a celebrity gossip magazine.

Dr Elizabeth Barry, Associate Professor in the Department of English at the University of Warwick has challenged perceptions that celebrity is a phenomenon born with the Romantic movement of the early 19th century. Instead she claims the modern public fascination with celebrity figures such as Kerry Katona and Jade Goody can be traced back to the rise of newspapers and magazines and the popularity of the obituaries in the 18th Century.

Obituaries were one of the most-read sections of 18th Century publications. They were intended to provide an account of the life of someone who had recently died as a way of illustrating how the life you led would be rewarded or punished in death. However their rise in popularity was because the people featured in obituaries became the objects of scandal and public fascination, or indeed the UK's first celebrities.

The Gentleman's Magazine in 1789 gave an account of the life of Isaac Tarrat, a man known to hire himself out to impersonate a doctor and tell fortunes in a fur cap, a large white beard and a worn damask night gown. Another subject, Peter Marsh of Dublin, was made famous by his convictions about his own death in 1740. After being hit by a mad horse

which died soon after, Mr Marsh convinced himself that he would also go mad and die. The Gentleman's Magazine reported that he duly died "of a conceit that he was mad".

Dr Barry said: "Celebrity – short-lived fame – became a feature of British society, and the untimely or dramatic death began to create as well as test this new kind of fame. The obituary plays a key role in this process and represents an important mechanism for introducing modern notions of fame and celebrity into British society."

Dr Barry said people from all walks of life could now become famous for being eccentric, rather than for historically momentous achievements. She added: "This period also witnessed a change in attitude towards fame that recognised the significance in a newly commercial environment of popular tastes and appetite."

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Provided by University of Warwick

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