

Introduction: What, Where, Who is Posterity?

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Abstract

This introduction sets out the key questions to be explored in the volume, examining contemporaneous definitions and uses of 'postérité', and the complex temporal games that both anticipating and describing posterity entail. It considers the precariousness of relying on an unknown future public, how gaps and flexibility might enhance the likely survival of a text or its author, and how the idea of posterity (in its various configurations) acts as a motivating force, conditioning how an individual acts even as 'real' posterity continually recedes into the distance before them.

Keywords

Posterity, afterlife, precarious, projection, imagination

'La postérité pour le philosophe, c'est l'autre monde de l'homme religieux.'¹

So writes Diderot to the sculptor Etienne Falconet in early 1766. Their long correspondence on the subject of posterity is perhaps the most cited reference to a topic that pervades cultural production in early modern France.² This preoccupation with individual posterity was especially acute at the moment Diderot wrote this oft-cited phrase; for a certain confluence of social and intellectual changes lent the idea of future glory a new charge for French cultural

¹ Letter of 15 February 1766, in Denis Diderot, *Correspondance*, 16 vols (Paris, Editions de Minuit, 1955-1970), VI, p. 67.

² Marc Buffat, 'Diderot, Falconet et l'amour de la postérité', *Recherches sur Diderot et sur l'Encyclopédie*, 43 (2008), 9-20.

producers in the latter years of the *ancien régime*.³ The idea that the eighteenth century saw the birth of ‘celebrity’ is widespread, and the changes credited with the development of a celebrity culture – including the growth of the public sphere and a booming print culture disseminating both word and image – had an impact too upon notions of posthumous fame.⁴ Alongside these shifts we find further developments: a new concept of an exemplary ‘grand homme’ that focused on moral and intellectual achievement rather than high birth or military might,⁵ a context of declining patronage and de-institutionalization, which removed the structures that had formerly served to provide individuals with a place in society and history, and an increasing secularism, with the attendant questions surrounding the afterlife of the soul. All of these factors contributed to a context in which access to the secular ‘autre monde’ of Diderot’s letter was not only potentially more pressing, but also far more in the hands of the individual than ever before.

It was Diderot, too, who wrote in the prospectus to the *Encyclopédie*: ‘La perfection d’une encyclopédie est l’ouvrage des siècles. Il a fallu des siècles pour commencer; il en faudra pour finir; mais à la postérité et à l’être qui ne meurt point.’⁶ This projection into the future is inflected somewhat differently to his statement to Falconet, for rather than implying an individualistic conception of living on in a secular ‘autre monde’, Diderot here configures posterity as humanity in continuity with the present. This collectively constituted ‘être qui ne meurt point’ is still a secular alternative, but this time to the eternal being that is God, rather than to the afterlife He promises to individual men. In this version of posterity, the work of an individual is bequeathed to the future not to further his own glory, but to contribute to a useful, shared project of knowledge collection and dissemination: still a characteristically eighteenth-

³ Elisabeth Badinter, for example, argues in her study of female ambition that the period saw an evolution of the desire to achieve happiness and success in one’s lifetime, and thus create a new form of afterlife by being remembered for these earthly pursuits. Badinter, *Émilie, Émilie: l’ambition féminine au XVIII^e siècle* (Paris: Flammarion, 1983), pp. 12-18.

⁴ Antoine Lilti, *Figures publiques. L’invention de la célébrité, 1750-1850* (Paris: Fayard, 2014). It is important to note that Lilti differentiates between ‘gloire’ (something long-lasting and posthumous) and celebrity (something experienced during one’s lifetime), though links can be made between them.

⁵ Jean-Claude Bonnet, *Naissance du Panthéon. Essai sur le culte des grands hommes* (Paris: Fayard, 1998).

⁶ Diderot, d’Alembert et al., *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, 28 vols (Geneva: Briasson, 1754–72), I, 5.

century conception, but a different one nonetheless. An anticipation of posterity for Diderot, then, is both individual and collective, selfish and selfless.

Yet this awareness of the gaze of future generations was by no means limited to the *philosophes* and their contemporaries, as a glance at the works of humanists like Petrarch – who wrote a ‘letter to posterity’ in the fourteenth century – makes very clear.⁷ According to the admittedly rough tool that is Google’s ‘ngram’ viewer, use of the term ‘postérité’ first explodes in the French corpus in the last third of the sixteenth century. Despite some degree of variability year on year, it generally increases steadily in frequency until 1794, before tailing off again in the nineteenth century.⁸ The longer history of this notion across the early modern period is therefore clearly worth closer consideration, as are the various ways in which it was refracted, rethought and even replaced as the eighteenth century progressed.

Much work has been done on the questions of reception history, literary influence, commemoration, and life writing. Rather than treading over the same ground, however, this volume, in a self-reflexive twist, addresses what we have called ‘anticipated afterlives’: the different ways in which early modern individuals are aware that they stand to ‘live on’ in some sense after their biological death (in the individual or collective senses set out by Diderot), and how they attempt to manage this transition to posterity. This focus on the ‘before’ of anticipation rather than the ‘after’ of posthumous reputation derives from the idea that posterity, in its purest sense, can only ever be anticipated. It is almost always a projection into an unknown future, a continually receding vanishing point. The individual, standing Janus-like between a lived but disappearing past, and a future that retreats as he approaches it,⁹ attempts nonetheless to fix a version of that past (whether his own, or that of another) for those to come, whose interpretations he can only guess at. This approach draws particularly on the influential contributions of Terence Cave, whose notion of ‘afterlives’ allows him to

⁷ Laura Refe, ed., *I ‘fragmenta’ dell’epistola ‘Ad posteritatem’ di Francesco Petrarca* (Messina: Università degli Studi di Messina, 2014).

⁸ Interestingly, results for the related terms ‘renom’ and ‘renommée’ show that use of these two words declined significantly towards the end of the seventeenth century, and did not rise again until the late eighteenth century. This might suggest that ‘postérité’ to some extent replaced these terms in the period.

⁹ This image is used by Anna Holland and Richard Scholar in their introduction to Holland and Scholar, eds, *Pre-Histories and Afterlives: Studies in Critical Method* (Oxford: Legenda, 2009), p. 2.

examine the refraction of fictional characters and images in different discourses across time and across changing cultural environments, as ghosts whose ongoing, insistent presence is precisely what our posterity-hungry subjects seem to desire.¹⁰

Any cultural production that performs this complex act of imagination-projection might be viewed, like the early French epitaphs examined by Helen Swift, as a moment of ‘temporal and ontological articulation between life and death’.¹¹ And the tenses used to discuss death and posterity indicate just how difficult this process of envisaging posterity really is.¹² Marmontel’s recipe for posthumous ‘gloire’ in the *Encyclopédie* states: ‘Celui qui se transporte dans l’avenir & qui jouit de sa mémoire, travaillera pour tous les siècles, comme s’il étoit immortel: que ses contemporains lui refusent la gloire qu’il a méritée, leurs neveux l’en dédommagent; car son imagination le rend présent à la postérité.’¹³ In other words, it is necessary to imagine that one has a glorious posthumous reputation, and work backwards to determine what actions that requires one to have performed; necessary to conceive of one’s own death in order to get the most out of life.¹⁴

This notion of anticipated posterity, then, by definition presupposes some sort of intentionality on the part of its subject: to use Cave’s term, an awareness of what awaits ‘downstream’. The desire for greatness can, in contemporary accounts, run dangerously close to vanity,¹⁵ and this is perhaps what lies behind Marmontel’s claims in his *Mémoires* that he writes only for his children and on the behest of his wife, or Montaigne’s choice to address his *Essais* to his friends and family.¹⁶ But even without such moral qualms, there is a structural difficulty in hoping to be remembered, in that the reactions of a future audience

¹⁰ Terence Cave, *Mignon’s Afterlives: Crossing Cultures from Goethe to the Twenty-First Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). For applications of the concept, see Holland and Scholar, *Pre-Histories and Afterlives*.

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¹² See Neil Kenny, *Death and Tenses* (Oxford: OUP, 2015).

¹³ Art. ‘Gloire’, in *Encyclopédie*, VII, 716–21.

¹⁴ In recent years this projection into the future to judge the present has gained new life in business management as the ‘pre-mortem’; see Gary Klein, ‘Performing a Project Premortem’, *Harvard Business Review*, 85, 9 (2007), 18–19.

¹⁵ Louis-Silvestre de Sacy’s *Traité de la gloire* (Paris: Huet, 1715), which argues for glory as stemming from public utility, warns that ‘la gloire que nous nous donnons nous mêmes est vicieuse; mais la gloire qui est donnée à une bonne action, & qui la suit naturellement est légitime, & dans l’ordre de Dieu’ (p. 17).

¹⁶ CROSS REF

cannot wholly be controlled or even imagined. Some individuals claim to have a very precise sense of the make-up and temporal position of their future audience, as well as the function of their afterlife. The *Commentaires* of Maréchal Blaise de Montluc (1577) are explicitly addressed to ‘capitaines mes compagnons’; his successors in the near future, to whom he offers both advice and a justification of his own actions¹⁷ – the latter in a similar manner to Bussy-Rabutin, as described by Helena Taylor in this volume.¹⁸ Others rely upon a vaguer, broader future public to create and perpetuate their memory: the ‘I shall not wholly die’ of Horace,¹⁹ and Ennius’ ‘alive from lips to lips of men I go a-winging’.²⁰ But as Joseph Harris shows with respect to Horace’s desire for glory in Corneille’s early tragedy, different components of a future audience may read an individual’s life and works quite differently.²¹ Posthumous reputation is changeable and unstable, and – if Mercier is to be believed – its solidity can only be determined in the most distant future: ‘il faut le tribunal ou l’assemblage de plusieurs siècles pour juger [...] l’homme de génie.’²²

Of course, the intention to perpetuate one’s memory cannot come without an awareness of this dual precariousness: any construction of oneself for the future may not even reach that future, and even if it does, the judgement passed upon it may not be that which was desired. And yet, the judgement of future audiences is absolutely required; must be sought, if – in Swift’s words – posterity is to be ‘activated’. The question becomes, then, how far it is possible to shape that judgement; to control both the survival and reception of the image one

¹⁷ Blaise de Montluc, *Commentaires de messire Blaise de Monluc, maréchal de France* (Bordeaux: Millanges, 1592), pp. 3-4.

¹⁸ **CROSS REF**

¹⁹ Horace, *Odes and Epodes*, trans. by N. Rudd, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 3.30, pp. 216-17.

²⁰ Ennius, *Epigrams*, 7-10, in *Remains of Old Latin, Volume I: Ennius. Caecilius*, trans. by E.H. Warmington, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1989), p. 403.

²¹ **CROSS REF**

²² Louis-Sébastien Mercier, *Le Nouveau Paris* [1797], ed. by Jean-Claude Bonnet (Paris: Mercure de France, 1994), p. 870. Mercier plays with the notion of projection and prediction in his *L’An 2440: rêve s’il en fut jamais* (Paris: La Découverte, 1999), a dystopian novel in which he imagines waking up after a sleep of several centuries.

creates; to anticipate the actions and reactions of that continually receding future vanishing point.²³

Mere survival of an object or text intended for posterity may be determined by pure chance: Oliver Wunsch's analysis of Diderot's accounts of material and visual art provides a clear demonstration of this. Yet Olivier Ritz's discussion of fragmentary ruins shows how historical narratives can thrive on such gaps and lacunae. And the precise nature of an individual's image, as it becomes crystallized in the minds and works of later audiences, is also subject to a far less binary process than might be suggested by the machinations of Bussy-Rabutin, who, as Taylor shows, set out to replace one version of himself – created during his lifetime by the institutions with which he interacted – with another shaped entirely by him. Instead, as Swift's examination of the flexible, fragmented process of identity construction demonstrates, there can be multiple versions of an individual's afterlife, configured according to the audience in any particular time or place. But rather than being dismissed as precariousness and a lack of control, this feature of posterity can be read as flexibility, adaptability: posterity as a process, rather than an outcome. Thus Bussy-Rabutin may not have been remembered in precisely the manner he had hoped, but he is nonetheless present to future audiences, whilst Marmontel – in John Leigh's account – ends up 'saving' John Stuart Mill from suicide, thus having a positive impact that he could not possibly have imagined.

²³ There is, of course, a gendered dimension to this question: the absence of female constructions of posterity in this collection is itself eloquent, speaking to how female voices have traditionally been viewed as more ephemeral than their male counterparts. The dual perspective taken on posterity here – considering those who anticipate it, and those who constitute it – suggests that the weaker survival of female voices results both from the status of their originators (writing in genres that are lost; lacking the power to control and perpetuate their names and works) and from the discriminatory stance taken by consecrating institutions, from academies and pantheons, to libraries and the academy. Yet at the same time, there is some evidence that early modern women relied on posterity to avenge them for the exclusion or criticism they suffered in life – consider, for example, Mme de Roland's *Appel à l'impartiale postérité* (Paris: Louvet, 1795). Whilst useful work has been done on female voices in life, especially in the context of the *querelle des femmes*, and on their place in history (see Michelle Perrot, *Les Femmes, ou les Silences de l'Histoire* (Paris: Flammarion, 1998) and Pamela Joseph Benson & Victorian Kirkham, eds, *Strong Voices, Weak History: Early Women Writers and Canons in England, France, and Italy* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), a specific examination of their relationship to their own posterity remains to be conducted.

To some who anticipate posterity, the mere fact of surviving, even in such unexpected forms, might ultimately take precedence over the accurate representation of their reality. Cave's account of the afterlives of fictional characters can shed light on how this process need not be seen as a loss. For him, the multiple, varied reconfigurations of Goethe's Mignon, each focusing predominantly on a different feature, nonetheless all contain the traces of one another, and thus though partial, always recall the original 'whole'. Whether under- or over-determined, a fictional character allows more space for such re-imaginings than the life of a real person, but this space is still there. Of the two rhymes for 'renommée' cited in Harris's article, this dissipated identity might seem more akin to insubstantial 'fumée'; linked to the ephemeral, intensely personal and presence-based celebrity that Lilti identifies as such an important facet of fame towards the end of our period. But the idea of a remnant, a trace, a continually present identifying feature, could conversely suggest the apparently opposing rhyme, 'imprimé': any presence in posterity entails having made a mark on the world, and though this mark may be interpreted in a variety of fashions, its mere presence is the basic necessary condition.

The amount of leeway left to the interpreter depends, of course, on the place and medium of remembrance. Examined in this volume are texts, monuments, ruins, artefacts, physical remains, atomic particles, and even children. In each case, it is necessary to establish the relationship between this remaining 'mark' and the individual who made it: how overtly it seeks to shape its reception, what it attempts to preserve, and where. Wunsch shows Diderot not only comparing sculpture and text as modes of preservation, but also shifting between discussion of the object and consideration of its creator. We might compare this to Vasari's preservation of the lives, rather than the works, of those he wrote about in his 1550 *Le Vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori, e architettori da Cimabue insino a' tempi nostri*,²⁴ itself in the tradition of Plutarch's *Lives* (1AD, translated into French in 1559) and emulated by Charles

²⁴ Giorgio Vasari, *Le Vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori, e architettori da Cimabue insino a' tempi nostri* [1550], 6 vols (Florence: Sansoni, 1866-87).

Perrault's *Hommes illustres* (1696 and 1701).²⁵ It has parallels, too, in Ritz's examination of the tension between events and individuals being remembered during the Revolution. Precise time and place become especially important in Swift's epitaphs, where the 'cy' of 'cy gist' slips between a literal demarcation of burial place and a (potentially) eternal marker of haunting textual presence. In this exploration of multimedial posterity, it becomes clear that the usually accepted divisions between media that last and those that are fragile and ephemeral alter according to the events with which those media come into contact. Condorcet's revolutionary history, despite its status as a written – and thus traditionally durable – artefact, is merely a provisional 'esquisse'; but in this intentional fragmentation, born of the impossibility of making immediate judgements regarding such a seismic event, it takes on the potential for reinterpretation, and therefore continued relevance, that can contribute towards preserving an individual.²⁶

Nonetheless, the conception of the text as durable plays an important role here, particularly in determining the types of individuals in whom these studies are interested. Though some of the protagonists of these articles are the kings and military heroes of whom history is traditionally made, authors are naturally especially prevalent, for, like Montaigne in Alex Gray's account, they are aware of – and might consider themselves more able to control – their own future existence. Certainly the 'homme de lettres' is, in Diderot's words, required to record the great exploits of the 'homme d'action'; and in turn needs the hero as his

²⁵ The *Lives* contained fifty short biographies of illustrious Greeks and Romans, paired to illustrate their common virtues or shortcomings. Jacques Amyot's translation (Amyot, *Les Vies des hommes illustres* [1559] (Paris: Dupot, 1826)) made the text widely accessible and very popular in mid-sixteenth century France. Among its admirers were Montaigne (who wrote a 'Défense de Seneque et de Plutarque', Montaigne, *Les Essais*, ed. by Jean Balsamo, Michel Magnien and Catherine Magnien-Simonin (Paris: Gallimard, 2007), pp. 757-64), Corneille (who, like Shakespeare, drew on the *Lives* for his Roman characters – see David Clarke, 'Plutarch's Contribution to the Invention of Sabine in Corneille's *Horace*', *MLR*, 89:1 (January 1994), 39-49) and Rousseau, whose *Confessions* credit Plutarch with having cured the author of his passion for novels (Rousseau, *Confessions* [1782], ed. by Jacques Voisine (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2011), p. 8). Perrault's *Les Hommes illustres qui ont paru en France pendant le XVII^e siècle* [1696 and 1701], ed. by D. J. Culpin (Tübingen: Gunter Narr, 2003) consisted of one hundred pen portraits of seventeenth-century men and, like the same author's *Siècle de Louis le Grand*, was a contribution to the quarrel of the ancients and the moderns, in which Perrault is considered to have been the leader of the 'modern' faction.

²⁶ On the different modes in which Voltaire and Rousseau survived, see Jessica Goodman, 'Between Celebrity and Glory? Textual After-Image in Late Eighteenth-Century France', *Celebrity Studies* (October 2016), doi:10.1080/19392397.2016.1233705.

subject:²⁷ Corneille's *Horace*, examined here by Harris, is a prime example of just such a mutual dependence, whilst Taylor's discussion of Bussy-Rabutin displays the power a writer believed himself to hold with respect to the posterity of his king and master. It is no accident that Voltaire's account of *Le Siècle de Louis XIV* (1751) pays so much attention to the cultural producers, and especially authors of the period: though this is in part related to his own self-fashioning as the successor of the great classical writers, it is also an indication that these are truly the people by and through whom history is shaped.

The prevalence of the written word as the means of transmitting information – and therefore stories and identities – to the future, somewhat complicates any attempt to produce a comprehensive picture of attitudes to posterity across the early modern period. The individuals in whom the articles in the collection are interested are inevitably those who not only cared about their future existence, but also, to a greater or lesser extent, succeeded in their attempts to perpetuate it, for they did leave some mark in the world. We have access, too, to the 'Van Gogh' types referred to by Harris, who acquire posthumous recognition despite either not having sought it, or even claiming to deliberately reject it in life.²⁸ What we by definition cannot access, though, are those for whom an afterlife, whether or not it was anticipated, was not forthcoming – including whole constituencies deprived of a powerful voice, for example the women mentioned in note 22 above. The hero of Corneille's *Suréna* purports to prefer earthly happiness in the present to the illusory prospect of 'living on' in future generations, claiming that:

...le moindre moment d'un bonheur souhaité
Vaut mieux qu'une si froide et vaine éternité.²⁹

Suréna here is specifically responding to Eurydice's claims that he should marry and allow his own family line to stretch into the future, and we should note that the primary sense of 'postérité' throughout the early modern period referred to one's own direct descendants rather than to future generations in general. Suréna's professed unconcern with the future, strikingly

²⁷ Art. 'Immortalité', in *Encyclopédie*, VIII, 576-77.

²⁸ CROSS REF

²⁹ Corneille, *Suréna* (1674), in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Georges Couton, 3 vols (Paris: Pléiade, 1980-87), I. 3. 311-12.

reflected in his exclamation ‘Que tout meure avec moi, Madame’,³⁰ also suggests his indifference to the world in general that will outlive him. Yet this purported dismissal of the weight of ‘éternité’ – written as it was by a playwright at the end of his life, whose glory was on the wane – may address precisely the future that it claims to disdain.

Indeed, it may be that no claim to disparage the idea of future audiences can be taken seriously, if it has made its way down to us, for in fact we *are* the very posterity that is written about. If a presence among readers, critics, and historians of the future is a measure of posthumous survival, then we are implicated, not only in enacting that posterity, but in many cases – and particularly in the tendency of the academy to seek out and rehabilitate minor figures – in positively creating it. This is a version of the observer’s paradox, drawn from quantum physics, and prevalent in sociological studies: how can we make an objective assessment of our object of study if the fact of us making that study – our very presence – alters its nature?³¹

But perhaps this apparent paradox also provides us with the most helpful way of understanding how posterity functions, and in drawing together the various strands I have set out here. For the person anticipating an afterlife, that afterlife cannot yet exist: it is only as the posterity of another that we can experience the reality of this phenomenon (even as we write, in turn, texts whose future life is uncertain). Our own individual posterity is – in an inversion of Derrida’s famous ‘always already’ construction – ‘never yet’ there for us to experience: as Marmontel asks, ‘jouït-on jamais de sa gloire autrement qu’en songe?’³² Thus it is that the notion of posterity has different functions for the subject and the recipient: in its most straightforward sense, it exists only for the audience, who use the ideas, image or works of a past individual or society for their own ends, and manipulate them according to context. Swift’s epitaphs are not (or at least, not only) to remember the individuals apparently commemorated: rather, she shows, they serve to think about the construction of identity, in

³⁰ *Suréna*, I. 3. 301.

³¹ Cave too uses a scientific comparison to describe posterity, but his is the Doppler effect, where something changes with respect to the position from which it is observed. This is more akin to the process of re-appropriation described above (*Pre-Histories and Afterlives*, p. 143)

³² Art. ‘Gloire’, in *Encyclopédie*, VII, 716–21.

both life and death; the act of commemoration helping those left behind. The dead, after all, are dead: even in Harris's exploration of the imagined consultation of the Roman dead, who wish to be remembered and not mourned, this engagement is clearly for the benefit of the living Horace, who uses it as a justification for his own glory.³³

What our contributors reveal, though, is that despite *actual* posterity being impossibly out of reach for its subject, *anticipated* posterity can nonetheless be very real. For just as Marmontel suggests, the idea of posterity can directly condition or inspire the actions and outputs of an individual, thus having a tangible and vital influence in his life, even in cases of apparent 'failure'. Bussy-Rabutin's appeal to posterity is in fact an attempt to manipulate his royal reader during his lifetime. The historians of the Revolution selected their topic and mode of expression with an eye on the reputation it could bring them in death, and thus created a genre that bears the marks of this reflection. Corneille, writing *Horace*, himself chose – in the old trope – to write about a hero to garner his reflected glory – and addressed himself to the 'ideal spectator' Richelieu, best placed to make his reputation; but in choosing a figure who already has a literary posterity, he also entered into a complicated negotiation of and reflexion on the different possible versions of a single afterlife.³⁴ Marmontel, motivated by the posterity embodied by his children, wrote in order to secure their financial future. Montaigne chose text as a repository for his identity in response to his consideration of how physical survival, in reconfigured atoms, did not provide a satisfactory posterity for the self. Whilst Diderot, for all his discussion of individual, secular afterlives, used the imagined collective future as a guiding principle for his monumental *Encyclopédie*.

Diderot's concept of secular redemption, with which we began, provides a neat way to conclude. The religious afterlife requires faith, not certainty, and yet the idea of it conditions a believer's actions in life. And however far the subjects explored here might believe themselves to have guaranteed their renown – Horace is convinced that 'je le

³³ **CROSS REF**

³⁴ Cf. Holland's discussion of the Pléiade poets, who, she says, project themselves both forwards and backwards in takings models from antiquity ('Early Modern Swansongs', *Pre-Histories and Afterlives*, pp. 51-75 (p. 62)).

recevrais’, whilst Bussy-Rabutin’s evocation of the concept acts as shorthand for his self-positioning as a great author in life – in the end they rely on an unknown audience to engage with the marks they leave on the world. Yet the idea of this audience, this engagement with an unimaginable future, inspires how they think, and write, and act. The tension between attempted control and acknowledged impotence is present from the very start of the period studied, even if its inflections shift, from an examination of the identity of the ‘great’ in the early epitaphs, to a consideration of the power of the individual with respect to institutions in the seventeenth century, to a late eighteenth century that looks inwards, to family, and when it does look outwards, can do so only in a fragmented fashion.

In his *Mémoires d’outre-tombe*, Chateaubriand states that ‘nous ignorons [...] la demeure de la postérité’.³⁵ This formula can, I suggest, be expanded and nuanced. For the individual who anticipates it, posterity resides in the imagination: its precise nature unknown and ungraspable, but its presence a strong motivator. And for those that come afterwards, it resides in us: or rather, in different forms in our multiple writings, and discussions, and use of the figures of the past for our own ends. Anna Holland and Richard Scholar, putting Cave’s notion of afterlives into practice in early modern France, outline their determination to read the ‘signs’ created by early modern individuals without the context of their later interpretation. But this volume suggests that the two posterities – anticipated and actual – can perhaps be read alongside one other; with the consciousness of what is not a simple success or failure of communication, but a productive tension, which encourages us to examine our own practices as much as those of the authors we study.

Biography

Jessica Goodman is Associate Professor and Tutorial Fellow in French at St Catherine’s College, Oxford. Her main interests lie in the eighteenth century, particularly in the ways in which authors create a public image of themselves, both in their lifetime and after their death. Her first book, *Goldoni in Paris* (Oxford: OUP, 2017), explores the career and posterity of the

³⁵ Chateaubriand, *Mémoires d’outre-tombe*, 2 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), I, 660.

Italian dramatic author in 1760s Paris, whilst a recently-published critical edition, *Commemorating Mirabeau* (Cambridge: MHRA, 2017), considers the play – especially the *dialogue des morts* – as a commemorative genre in the revolutionary decade.

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