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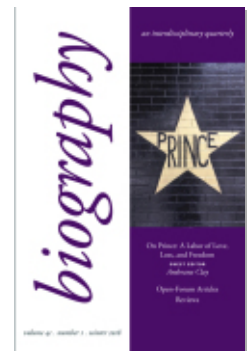
Making Marie Curie: Intellectual Property and Celebrity Culture in an Age of Information by Eva Hemmings Wirtén
(review)

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Eva Hemmings Wirtén. *Making Marie Curie: Intellectual Property and Celebrity Culture in an Age of Information*. U of Chicago P, 2015, 248 pp. ISBN 978-0226235844, \$35.00.

Eva Wirtén's *Making Marie Curie* is a compact study of several aspects of Marie Curie's life and career as a public figure rather than a biography of a scientist at work on her science. The book is concerned, in successive chapters (which might well have stood alone as journal articles) with four topics: 1) Curie's writing of her own life, 2) her and her husband Pierre's attitudes toward the ownership of their discoveries, especially radium, 3) the scandal surrounding Marie's affair with Paul Langevin after Pierre's death, and 4) Marie Curie's role in the 1920s and 1930s in the League of Nations' attempt to create an international standard for intellectual property pertaining specifically to scientists as creators of significant novelty (as opposed to the authorial rights of artists and the patent rights of inventors).

Thus, the book uses Marie Curie and her life and fame as an opportunity to discuss current concerns—intellectual property, celebrity culture, and the organization of scientific information—and to retroject these concerns to the beginning of the twentieth century as an “origin story” of tensions evident in our culture now. The first of these is the tension between science as “public knowledge” and science as intellectual property, privately held, in a commercial culture. The second tension is created by the emergence of the scientist as a celebrity figure and cultural icon. This tension has long been known and chronicled in the case of Albert Einstein and has become a substantial part of the story of Einstein's life. Whether we are to characterize Einstein as the “male Curie” or Curie as the “female Einstein” is immaterial, as these two Nobel scientists have become canonical representations of scientific celebrity, the gendered character of which has undergone considerable scrutiny for the better part of half a century.

Wirtén is quite open about her aim, and says toward the beginning of the book that “we write about the past as an expression of present concerns,” and then goes on to quote Stephen Shapin: “we *can* write about the past to find out about how it came to be that we live as we do now, and indeed, for giving better descriptions of the way we live now” (3, emphasis in original). This interesting comment falls halfway between an anthropological viewpoint and a kind of Whiggish presentism in which we concentrate deliberately on portions of the past that seem to lead forward into us. I take Wirtén's comment to indicate that she both understands that we do this and endorses the procedure and its intent.

While I have no argument with the idea that we write about the past as an expression of present concerns, I would suggest that in this regard, we proceed with caution. The anthropologist Mary Douglas went into this dilemma

in some detail in her 1986 book *How Institutions Think*, in which she points out that this sort of historical revisionism “distorts as much after revision as it did before. The aim of revision is to get the distortions to match the mood of the present times” (69). Douglas also argues, “History emerges in an unintended shape as a result of practices directed to immediate, practical ends. To watch these practices establish selective principles that highlight some kind of events and obscure others is to inspect the social order operating on individual minds” (69–70). Similarly, the sociologist of science Robert Merton has repeatedly argued that, in fact, the history of science exists as a discipline precisely to look at those aspects of scientific practice that scientists are trained not to see. Once we know that our culture creates shadow zones where we are encouraged not to look and brightly lit areas on which we are urged to concentrate, we can use this information to our critical advantage.

Wirtén is not aiming to retell the well-worn story of how Marie Curie came to be a cultural and scientific icon—the first great woman scientist of the modern age—but rather to explore how she participated in and actually “authored” this particular version of her life. Wirtén aims to bring that “shadow zone” into the light by retelling the story of Marie Curie in which Marie Curie is not so much discovered as invented by Curie herself. Each part of the Curie story has an obverse. On the one hand, Marie and Pierre “selflessly” declined to try to patent their process for purifying radium, leaving it in the public domain for the good of all. On the other hand, Marie profited enormously from her celebrity as a selfless personification of all that was best in science as public knowledge for the good of mankind. While shrewdly managing what she would endorse and not endorse publicly, and thus preserving her reputation for selfless diffidence, she maintained close ties to centers of power and industry. Her very rejection of commercial advantage necessitated patronage in the form of money, instrumentation, and radium itself, particularly emanating from the United States, where she was celebrated in the same way that Einstein was, and to which she repeatedly traveled to “perform her one-woman show of Marie Curie.” This phrasing is my conceit, not Wirtén’s, but it gets at her chronicle of the aim of Curie’s activities and presence in the United States through the 1920s. This self-conscious management on Curie’s part was first examined in a doctoral dissertation by Judith Magee in 1989 and appeared in Susan Quinn’s 1995 biography of Curie but bears deeper scrutiny here. This Marie Curie is no naïve dreamer but someone who understood and manipulated the power of image. I want to emphasize that this reading is not offered by Wirtén as a criticism but as a historical corrective to an overly idealized version of Curie drawn from authorized biographies and Hollywood films. Wirtén shows how Marie Curie herself deliberately created spotlighted areas and shadow zones for her own purposes, delineations followed by many of her biographers for decades thereafter.

The story of Marie Curie becomes more complicated the more deeply Wirtén interrogates it. The retelling of the scandal surrounding Curie's affair with Paul Langevin is an excellent case in point. Curie herself, and her supporters in this matter, employed the rhetorical strategy of emphasizing the difference between public and private life, and that Curie's public life was open to examination but her private life was not. This was a way of getting past public criticism of her liaison with "a married man," a student of her deceased husband whom she was accused of seducing and leading away from his wife. Wirtén goes deeply into the details of the incident and sees it (I think correctly) as a titanic struggle over image management. These concerns about Curie's image had nothing to do with the facts or morality of the case but everything to do with an ongoing political struggle in France between a bourgeois, republican meritocracy (represented by Curie) and a revanchist, aristocratic/monarchial conservative movement spearheaded by *Action Française*, which could employ the incident for political gains. What I think is most important about this story, as it is told here by Wirtén, is that it reveals the shadow war over Curie's *image*, in which everything that was said was a marker for some other concealed position. I was at first puzzled by the importance Wirtén gave to this incident, but I now think it is the most interestingly told story in the book.

In addition to constantly urging us to see the contrast between the image of Marie Curie and the historical facts which can be marshaled concerning Curie's conduct, Wirtén's work implicitly raises another significant biographical issue. For nearly a century, there is and has been a biographical industry surrounding Marie Curie, and Wirtén does a good job of leading us through this labyrinth. She gives a dispassionate and incisive critique of a variety of partial, ideologically motivated, and sometimes just strange readings of Marie Curie's life, career, and importance. Yet in spite of all this industrial-strength scholarship and writing on Curie, we eventually discover that we still lack anything like a biography of the central figure that can claim to be scientifically and intellectually definitive. In this way, Wirtén's biography can be compared to Susan Quinn's 1995 study *Marie Curie: A Life*, and its predecessor Robert Reid's 1974 *Marie Curie*, both of which were criticized for their failure to explore, chronicle, and analyze her scientific work. We know everything about Marie Curie, apparently, except the fine details of what she did scientifically, when she did it, to whom (other than Pierre) she was scientifically most indebted, and what, in the end, was her own significant and unique contribution to science. As historian of science Lawrence Badash said in his review of Susan Quinn's book: "good stuff all this. Fun to read. But it could have been

about Marie Curie the social worker, or horsewoman, or chanteuse” (318). He went on to say, “In the past few decades we have seen a great increase in the quantity and quality of scholarship about working women. It is no secret that women suffered institutionalized sexism, fought hard to succeed, and experienced emotional trauma along the way. By basing a biography of a woman entirely on her emotions, not on her intellect, Quinn has struck a serious blow *against* women’s history” (319).

Considering again Mary Douglas’s comment about shadow zones and spotlights, we often find ourselves in the unusual and faintly ridiculous position of reading biographical studies that consider little or not at all the achievements and actions of a biographical subject. It is one thing, in a more permissive and inquisitive age, to give full scope to the private, the sexual, the concealed, the manipulative, and other aspects of the scientist’s career, but it is entirely another thing to let these concerns crowd out the narrative and critical consideration of the work that made the biographical subject notable. There is all too often a complete inversion of the shadow zone and the spotlight, illuminating the shadows while letting the spotlighted areas go dark. In spite of the many strengths of Wirtén’s treatment of Curie, her excellent critical focus on Curie’s responses to sexism, of Curie’s desire not just to succeed but to manage her success, and even to a certain extent Curie’s exploitation of the emotional trauma of her life as a way of getting patronage, Wirtén still leaves us with a Marie Curie with no science in view. In that sense this well-considered book about Marie Curie, for all its strengths, is like a book about Virginia Woolf that would concern itself critically with previous writing about her sexuality and her madness, her founding of the Hogarth Press, her views on authorship, and the management of her own image as an author and critic, but never got around to talking about the contents of her work, the literary influences upon it, the impact it left on her immediate literary successors, or any interactions between these biographical matters and her creative work.

All that notwithstanding, should a scholar dare to produce a full-scale, scientific biography of Marie Curie, Wirtén’s *Marie Curie* would certainly be an indispensable resource in the process of researching Curie’s life. Wirtén lays out not merely the pitfalls, but the ideological minefields surrounding the life, work, and legacy of Marie Curie. Wirtén’s metabiographical work is, on its own merits, extremely valuable, and I strongly recommend that serious students of scientific biography (in particular) give it a careful reading.

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