

## Living and dying by the Media

In a recent publication of ours it was remarked that “to gain their place in the world” of the twenty-first century, celebrities “need not be able to do anything.” Jade Goody’s originality was to become a celebrity *because* she had no special abilities or achievements. She appeared on *Big Brother* as a non-celebrity and so became one. She retained her status by insulting the beautiful Indian filmstar Shilpa Shetty on a later *Big Brother*. As celebrity she was paid accordingly and lived the expected lifestyle. Now she is dying. She has reportedly accepted an offer of £700,000 for exclusive photographic rights at her forthcoming wedding. (Funeral rights have not yet been reported.) “ ‘I’m hoping I will have the strength to walk on my big day,’ the former *Big Brother* contestant told the *Sun*. ‘It would be so cruel to be robbed of that one last thing as well.’ ” (BT Yahoo homepage, 18 February 2009) The zenith of Jade Goody’s fame surely came in the week leading up to her wedding. Every day a different story about her made the headlines, or about the bridegroom, whose curfew order was to be relaxed on his wedding night. But though “robbed” is media-celebrity speak, Jade Goody is now real. Could anything be more unreal than reality TV? The convention is that the contestants on *Big Brother* enact an extempore soap opera and speak in the appropriate lingo. Consciousness of the cameras is ever present, even if viewers never see them. It is a modern version of living as if conscious of the sampler on the wall, “Thou God seest me.” You, prurient amoral viewers, see us all and we act accordingly. What could be soapier than the terrible illness and (second) wedding? No: the new photos of Jade Goody are different. “But cancer, now, / That is something real.” She really is growing pale and spectre-thin. It would be wonderful if Jade Goody could be treated as Allan Woodcourt treats the dying Jo in *Bleak House*, even more wonderful if, like another undistinguished character in Dickens, in her death Jade Goody, “emerged from the shadow in which man walketh and disquieteth himself in vain, took upon her the dread solemnity of the sages and patriarchs.” Dread and solemnity are not media commodities. Jade Goody needs prayer, perhaps not for a miraculous recovery (imagine what the media would do with that!), more for a good death. If she has a death-bed conversion one mark of the genuineness will be not to inform the media.

*P.S.* We said that one mark of death-bed conversion would be privacy. Jade Goody’s baptism was offered Sunday 8 March 2009 as her last publicity coup. Max Clifford (the publicity agent and now a celeb himself) said that the “very short and emotional service” was the end of the publicity, but the hope that he would keep his word and let Jade Goody have a private end and funeral did not last a day. Monday 9 March she was threatened by a female intruder with a hammer. Tuesday 10 March poor Jade was reported to be going blind. Finally(?) Wednesday 11 March “Brave Jade gives her last interview” was the *Mirror* headline. Those who live by the media cannot help dying by the media. Well, sacraments if properly conducted are made real by faith. Let us hope that despite the media it was a genuine baptism. Then *requiescat in pace*.

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