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# 'WHOEVER HEARD OF ANYONE BEING A SCREAMING SUCCESS FOR DOING NOTHING?'

## 'Sabrina', the BBC and television fame in the 1950s

Su Holmes

*Drawing on archival sources from the BBC Written Archive Centre, including press coverage, memos and scripts, this article seeks to contribute to historical work on celebrity by exploring the discourses surrounding television fame through the prism of 'Sabrina'—a young woman made famous by BBC television in the mid-1950s as the 'bosomy blonde who didn't talk'. It is particularly productive to excavate this case study of Sabrina right now, when popular media discourse is saturated with debate about the apparently declining currency of modern fame—a debate which often positions female celebrities centre stage. Indeed, in 1955 one BBC official asked a question which might seem decidedly familiar to celebrity audiences today: '[Sabrina] is a wonder of our time which makes us absolutely terrified of the power of television. Whoever heard of anyone being a screaming success for doing nothing?' In returning to the case study of Sabrina, this article examines a so far neglected persona in the institutional, cultural and ideological contexts which shaped early (British) television fame.*

**KEYWORDS** 'Sabrina'; BBC; celebrity; fame; 1950s television; 'blonde bombshell'

The idea that contemporary celebrity represents a radical break with fame in the 'past' is regularly articulated in media discourse. Whilst academic work has offered a more nuanced narrative history in this regard, the emphasis on change has nevertheless made a successful bid for legitimacy and acceptance. Such claims may not be intrinsically problematic. But it is still early in the development of historiographic work on fame, especially when it comes to television. When compared to work on film stardom, historical work on television fame has been less extensive, particularly when it comes to the British context. American scholars have built up a small but significant body of work on early television and radio stardom (Murray), as well as the shift of film stars to the home (Mann; Marshall; Becker *Pictures*), but interest in the British context has been more limited and sporadic (for exceptions see Turnock; Holmes *British TV*; Holmes *Entertaining*). The focus has primarily been conceptual (Ellis; Langer), or contemporary, with the latter largely encouraged by the burgeoning interest in Reality TV (e.g. Biressi and Nunn). In view of the paucity of work on the historical foundations here, this explosion of interest in television fame makes a return to the past particularly important.

In the context of this article, it is significant that Reality TV has been debated in the context of emerging work on the gendered politics of contemporary fame—and the latter is explored in a 2008 edition of *Genders* entitled 'Going Cheap? Female Celebrity in the Tabloid, Reality and Scandal Genres' (Negra and Holmes). In light of the recent fascination

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with female celebrity 'trainwrecks', as well as the extent to which female celebrities are often positioned at the centre of debates about the 'declining' currency of fame, such a focus asks questions about the intensifying double standards underlying a post-feminist cover story about gender egalitarianism. Yet the editors also sound a note of qualification about the 'newness' of this shift:

In using the word 'new' here, we are mindful of the fact that claims of change and development in this area are complex, and as such, should be up for contestation and debate... In terms of historical comparisons, the role of the case study should play a crucial role in this respect. (Negra and Holmes)

This article argues that 'Sabrina', made famous by BBC television in the mid-1950s as the 'bosomy blonde who didn't talk', can productively function as one such case study. In 1955, one BBC official asked a question which might seem decidedly familiar to contemporary celebrity audiences today: '[Sabrina] is a wonder of our time which makes us absolutely terrified of the power of television. Whoever heard of anyone being a screaming success for doing nothing?' ('Sabrina Scare'). In fact, in 2002, *The Daily Mail* printed an article on Sabrina which, whilst positioning her as 'Britain's first sexbomb', drew comparisons with the British glamour model 'Jordan' (Katie Price),<sup>1</sup> suggesting that Sabrina was 'the first Jordan of them all' ('Britain's first'). In foregrounding this connection, I am mindful of what John Corner describes as a danger of historiographic media research: the tendency to posit an undue proximity between past and present which positions the 'the past as... [simply] "today with oddities"' (Corner 277). Yet Corner also indicates how an 'enriched sense of "then" produces, in its differences and commonalities combined, a stronger and more imaginative sense of "now"' (Corner 275). In pursuing the possibilities of this historical dialogue, my aims are deliberately modest: drawing on archival sources from the BBC Written Archive Centre (WAC), including press coverage, internal memos and production scripts, I explore the discourses surrounding television fame through the prism of 'Sabrina'. This is particularly important given the paucity of detailed case studies from this period. As one of few detailed studies of early television fame in Britain, Andy Medhurst's (Medhurst) discussion of Gilbert Harding, the grumpy and erudite panellist on the BBC's *What's My Line?* (BBC, initially 1951–62), is regularly invoked to stand *in* for the medium's relations with fame and celebrity—despite Medhurst's own conclusion that Harding (in terms of the extensive intertextual nature of his image and his closeted identity as a gay man) might be positioned as 'exceptional' rather than 'typical'. It is part of my argument here that it is surely difficult to establish what is typical or exceptional in such an unknown field, and the focus on another case study cannot 'solve' this historical problematic. But at the level of historical research, the case study can nevertheless form a building block—one voice among many—for the mapping of a wider historical image of the assumptions, expectations and anxieties surrounding television fame in Britain in the mid 1950s.

### The 'Sabrina Gimmick' and the BBC

It is first important to indicate how and why the Sabrina persona was created. 'Sabrina' was born Norma Sykes in Manchester, in 1936. Her family later relocated to

Blackpool, but when she was 16, she moved to London in the hope of pursuing a modelling career. The teenager initially posed for several nude photographic shots, and after being rejected by leading photographers for being 'too voluptuous', she dieted to cultivate a wasp-like waist (simultaneously making the bust appear more prominent). It is at this stage that the model obtained what was known as 'cheesecake' (soft glamour) work: she became much in demand as a photographic model, and 'her blonde charm often . . . decorated the pages of the better known men's magazines' (such as the pocket-sized *Spick* and *Span*).<sup>2</sup> After contracting Bill Watts as her agent, Norma appeared on the front covers of several prominent magazines—the most visible of which was the popular *Picture Post*. It was this cover that signalled her emergence as one of the leading photographic models in Britain at the time, and it was through this visibility that she obtained her television role as the 'glamour component' in Arthur Askey's BBC variety show, *Before Your Very Eyes* (BBC 1952–6, ITV 1956–8). The show featured comic monologues, skits and sketches, and was fronted by the diminutive, bespectacled British comedian Arthur Askey. 'Sabrina' appeared in sketches as the 'bosomy blonde' who literally didn't talk, and as she described in the *Evening Standard*: 'My gimmick is to puzzle the viewers to get them wondering "will Sabrina talk tonight"?' ('Sabrina Keeps'). Following the television show, she appeared in a number of advertising campaigns (for fashion, jewellery, cosmetics and household products), as well as a number of small British film roles which traded on the Sabrina persona, including *Stock Car*, (1956) *Ramsbottom Rides Again* (1956) *Blue Murder at St Trinian's* (1957) and *Make Mine a Million* (1959). In 1956, she also released a single called the 'Samba Sabrina'—a spin-off from a sketch in *Before Your Very Eyes*.

This indicates two key things. First, that the 'Sabrina' persona explicitly invoked Norma Sykes' previous status as a well-known glamour model, and second, that Sabrina's fame had a ubiquitous, cross-media currency for which the television persona was largely a springboard. But the television role in particular poses complex questions about how to research the Sabrina persona. The fact that Sabrina was rendered mute on-screen is certainly significant in assessing the gendered nature of her fame, but it also has methodological implications when it comes to reconstructing her image for analysis. After all, although certain skits which feature Sabrina still exist in audio-visual form, the scripts from *Before Your Very Eyes* necessarily offer limited evidence given the silent nature of her role. In this regard, although extratextual material has long since been seen as crucial to the construction and interpretation of the star or celebrity image (Dyer *Heavenly*), Sabrina's circulation is particularly central in constructing the discursive construction of her fame. Not only was this framework more visible and pervasive in the construction of the 'Sabrina phenomenon', but it was also a framework to which the star herself verbally *contributed*. Yet this suggestion of agency is of course complex. As Adrienne McLean discusses in her study of Rita Hayworth, there are 'still many . . . who would hesitate to grant anything resembling subjectivity and agency to a female star image' (McLean 4). However, a number of studies, McLean's included, have complicated this dismissal (Dyer *Heavenly*; Holmes *Entertaining*). When it comes to studies of stars and celebrities, we are necessarily talking about the representation of agency, in so far as 'actual' agency cannot be determined or measured. In this regard, and with respect to Sabrina, it is clear that the extratextual framework (especially when situated alongside her television role) offered a

site across which struggles surrounding agency and gender were most visibly and complexly played out.

One of my aims in this article is to consider how Sabrina might contribute to knowledge about the historical specificities of *television* fame. Yet it is also important to acknowledge the similarities and continuities with film stardom on a number of different levels. This is not least of all in terms of the wider currency of the 'blonde bombshell' image. As Pam Cook reminds us in her analysis of Diana Dors, the 1950s gave birth 'to a host of exotic, glamorous blonde [British] starlets—Sabrina, Belinda Lee, Shirley Eaton and Sandra Dorne', who 'offered similar exhibitions of excessive sexuality' modelled on the likes of Marilyn Monroe, Jayne Mansfield and Lana Turner (Cook 168). Yet whilst Cook positions Dors as the most visible face in the British bombshell contingent, this hierarchy reflects the extent to which the contours of film stardom have been more visible than those of television. After all, whilst we should be mindful of the often hyperbolic nature of celebrity press, in 1955 *People* described Sabrina as becoming, in a 'single stroke' the most talked-about person in UK entertainment for years' ('One Look'), and she was often positioned as 'beating' Dors when it came to column inches.

Yet this relationship, and the cross-media currency of the blonde bombshell, sits awkwardly in relation to conceptual work on film and television fame which has tended to stress the differences between the media. Canonical conceptions of television fame foreground the qualities of intimacy, familiarity, proximity and ordinariness, suggesting that television constructs 'personalities' rather than 'stars' (Langer; Ellis). The term 'TV personality' certainly had a currency in the 1950s, and it was variously used in relation to hosts, announcers or panel game faces (Sylvia Peters, Macdonald Hobley, Gilbert Harding, Eamonn Andrews), as well actors and actresses from popular fiction. But to end the discussion of terminology here too readily accepts the parameters set out by subsequent conceptual approaches in the field. The term 'celebrity' *did* have a currency in relation to television in the 1950s, as did the term 'star', even while differences between television and film were being discussed. Sabrina was not constructed through discourses of a 'cosy', domestic familiarity, nor an unreachable, distant glamour. Indeed, she was often simply referred to as a 'celebrity'.

P. David Marshall has explored the historical genealogy of the term celebrity, and he demonstrates how it has long since carried a ring of disdain. It is in the nineteenth century use of the term that we see a shift from an affinity 'with piety and religion to some modern sense of false value' (Marshall 4). This ring of inauthenticity, as well the sense of a more ubiquitous, and thus devalued status, permeates sources from the period under examination here, such as David Wainwright's article entitled 'Celebrity' in a 1960 edition of the British newspaper the *Weekly Post*. Specifically reflecting on television's wider role in cultivating the 'insidious influence of "entertainment" on our national life', Wainwright bemoans how scientists and politicians, 'people who have done most to make life pleasanter and more purposeful for their fellow men', are rarely applauded because they are not seen as 'celebrities'. Furthermore, he positions this concept as inseparable from the growth of television given that someone is now not seen as a 'celebrity' unless they also have 'the "public face" that television requires' (Wainwright). Wainwright is expressing concern about the decline of a merited-claim-to-fame, or what Chris Rojek (Rojek *Celebrity*) has since termed a shift from *achieved* to *attributed* celebrity, in which fame is the result of

concentrated media representation. This shift has not been attributed solely to television, but the medium has occupied centre-stage in debates about the status of modern fame (we only need to look at the discussion which has surrounded Reality TV). According to Joshua Gamson:

Television, with its constant flow . . . and vast space-filling needs, has from its initial boom provided the most significant new outlet for image creation . . . [I]t has become increasingly possible *in a practical sense* to create familiarity with images without regard to content . . . [A]s the prime outlet for, disseminator of, and certifier of public images, television has made decontextualized fame a ubiquitous currency [original emphasis]. ('Assembly' 271)

Gamson's work (*Claims*, 'Assembly') represents one of few attempts to situate the emergence of television within a longer historical trajectory of fame, and he associates the medium with a shift towards a heightened emphasis on celebrity as a commercial discourse. According to Gamson, it is in the post-war period, with the increasing growth of media outlets, that we witness the increasing visibility of the manufacture narrative of fame, when it henceforth becomes a 'serious contender' in explaining celebrity (*Claims* 44).

To be sure, the circulation and critical reception of Sabrina positions her as an *exemplary* site in debates about the potentially 'manufactured' and decontextualised nature of television fame, which I return to below. But it is important to recognise that Gamson is dealing with the American context, and his argument is rooted in such contexts as the decline of the Hollywood studio system, the rapid spread of television, and the overt commercialism of the television persona (which was enmeshed with sponsorship and product promotion) (see also Murray). Thus, it is not simply media, but also national specificity that requires consideration. After all, and in terms of thinking about the nature of what we might call a public service television fame (Holmes *Entertaining*) the BBC expressed little desire in the 1950s to facilitate the intertextual circulation of their performers, nor to promote them beyond the confines of the television screen. Whilst the corporation became more aware of the need to retain and promote its talent once the competition from ITV (1955), there is still an institutional emphasis on the corporation's apparently uneasy relations with celebrity.

In 1949, Sir William Haley, the BBC's first post-war Director General, contrasted the development of television in Britain and America as he felt it likely that American television would be built around 'personalities', while British television would favour 'ideas' ('there is little interest in America whether television does plays or ballet or opera. There is every interest in who is becoming popular . . .') (Haley, cited in Briggs 284). This perspective can also be related to the BBC's wider historical ambivalence about the extent to which, as a public corporation, they should engage in the practice of publicity generation. The BBC did have a Publicity Department, and this included a Television division by the mid-1950s. But even this expressed a distaste for 'the ballyhoo . . . the press party, the interviews, the glamour photographs, the screen-trailing, the Sunday paper story', especially when 'nothing succeeds like a good programme'.<sup>3</sup>

This can be understood as part of the BBC's particular conception of public service in which a suspicion of the 'commercial', and a rather vague emphasis on the quality of programme 'content', reigns supreme. At the same time, and further invoking

comparisons with film stardom, this suspicion of stardom is not necessarily specific to the corporation. In negotiating its difference from Hollywood cinema, British cinema has been associated with an 'anti-star inflection of stardom' (Babington 20), and in fan discourse of the 1940s and 1950s, the apparently 'fresh', 'natural' beauty of British female stars was regularly counterpoised to the seemingly 'artificial' glamour of Hollywood. In this respect, it is fascinating that Sabrina's closest visual companion in British popular culture was indeed Diana Dors, and Dors was regularly positioned as 'unbritish' and 'Americanised' in her 'excessive' display of glamour, sexuality and consumption (see Cook). In fact, the BBC's role in the construction of 'Sabrina' was more often compared in popular discourse to the workings of the Hollywood 'machine':

Those normally dignified BBC people became as publicity-crazy and gimmick-beserk over the new . . . showgirl, Sabrina, as any Hollywood studio. . . Bill Ward, the producer, auditioned a dozen girls and picked her. He then had seven days in which to 'sell' her, so he called in the publicity boys, saying: 'Britain must know this girl before she even appears. Now get cracking'. ('The BBC Goes Beserk')

Another reviewer asserted with a note of alarm that:

It's a historic, frightening development. The age of the awful gimmick is upon us. It's happened before in America, but this is the first time in Britain the entertainment gimmick has been promoted so swiftly and so crudely. [It has also been employed by]. . . the dignified, didactic, uplifting BBC which fires announcers lest they are too pretty and over-excite viewers. . . . ('The Sabrina Phenomenon')

In relation to early television fame, it has been suggested that excessive glamour was seen as 'incompatible' with the medium and the emphasis on the domestic and the familiar (and Becker explores how there was an emphasis on even American female television stars 'eschewing constructed glamour of Hollywood') (*Pictures* 75). Yet despite the reviewer's insistence that the BBC fires announcers 'lest they are too pretty and over-excite viewers', this is contradicted by the often glamorous image of women on television at this time, from Sylvia Peters to the *What's My Line?* panellist, Isobel Barnett. This undermines the idea that television fame was simply constituted through discourses of an 'ordinary' mundanity, or that proximity and familiarity were somehow antithetical to glamour. In the British context, female television announcers, hosts and actresses appeared in a regular spot in *TV Mirror* called 'Star Choice', and this held them up as *desirable* and fashionable models of femininity. 'Star Choice' explored the womens' fashion tastes and conveyed fashion advice, while also giving details of how to emulate their clothes.

Yet what is at stake in the apparent disjuncture between Sabrina and the BBC's existing version of television 'glamour' is clearly class. Sabrina does not appear to conform to notions of 'respectable glamour' (Skeggs 91)—a glamour that did not breach the boundaries of the middle-class taste culture of the period. Although it only added to the star's publicity, the BBC considered it unfortunate that the nude photos of Norma Sykes taken in 1953 resurfaced (on the back of playing cards) when Sabrina was launched in the television show. An internal BBC memo written at the end of 1955 acknowledges the currency of class distaste here (whilst it simultaneously expressed little doubt about the BBC's highly active role in the promotion of Sabrina):

The BBC rightly or wrongly exploited Miss Norma Sykes from Blackpool and turned her into Sabrina. This exploitation was based on no talent but on an unusual physical characteristic.

As a result, Sabrina has become a topic for cheap gags—most of them a little ‘blue’.

She is certainly not a ‘celebrity’ in any sense that I would use the word . . .

Standards are still the BBC’s strong point. We will gain nothing by lowering them.

As far as I am concerned Sabrina has been exploited to a point of irritation and some disgust; and this should now stop.<sup>4</sup>

The comments in the BBC Viewer Research Reports echoed this distaste, given that whilst Askey was praised as ‘lively, lovable and always funny’, “‘Sabrina” was. . .thought to have introduced an unfortunate note of vulgarity’.<sup>5</sup> Although it would be fair to suggest that the star’s family roots were of lower-middle rather than working-class status, she is discursively coded *as* working class, whether in terms of a north/south contrast (a ‘Lancashire lass made “good”’) or in terms of her sexual and thus corporeal display. To be sure, references to a star’s humble origins are not unusual in media publicity or star back stories—forming as they do part of the narrative of the ‘success myth’ (Dyer *Heavenly*), and its invocation of the American dream (McLean). Yet the gendered contours of this construction are important here. As Bev Skeggs has explored at length, class often functions to regulate conceptions of ‘appropriate’ femininity, and there is a long history of working-class women in Britain being associated with discourses of sexual and corporeal ‘excess’ (Skeggs). Indeed, reactions to the apparently vulgar ‘excess’ of Sabrina may well have been intensified by expectations surrounding television’s familial and domestic address, whilst the medium’s aesthetic contours were often seen as *literally* incompatible with the star’s physical proportions. After all, there was the suggestion that Sabrina might in fact ‘break forth’ or ‘explode’ on-screen—as apparently bolstered by the fact that such an anatomical ‘mishap’ was witnessed at a film premiere in 1955 when the star was:

[W]earing a black velvet evening dress that fitted her like a second skin. The crowd pressed close to admire the terrain and some lout stepped on the star’s train. There was a warning sound of tearing fabric, followed by a sight for sore male eyes. Sabrina had been wearing nothing under the dress from the waist up, and her braless bosom sprang almost into full view . . . The bobbies had to be summoned to keep order. (‘What’s Up’)

### ‘A very pretty girl’: Forms and Functions of Sabrina’s Fame

The anxiety about unstoppable corporeal/sexual ‘excess’ (which requires immediate patriarchal and institutional containment) is explicit here, and it is useful to pause at this stage on how these anxieties are illuminated by the blonde bombshell’s commentary on shifting social relations of class, gender and sexuality. Cook positions the 1950s blonde bombshell as a powerful ‘Dionysian figure, celebrating a primeval fertility associated with eroticised, active female sexuality’ which emerges to challenge the post-war emphasis on a domesticated female sexuality centred on home and family (Cook 170–1, see also Dyer *Heavenly*). In particular, given that wartime clothing had sought to efface signs of sexual difference, the post-war bombshell marks the ‘return of the repressed’ (Cook 170). To be



sure, fashions of the 1950s, such as Dior's 'New Look', also *showcased* women's hips, thus emphasising their fertility and childbearing functions. Yet the bombshell offered a hyperbolic accentuation—and even parody—of this, but in a context clearly removed from marriage and family.

Sabrina was represented as a single girl, and as thus potentially seeking a male suitor, but the representation of her sexual agency is complex. With respect to Marilyn Monroe, Dyer explores how her on- and off-screen persona often played (to comedic effect) on the apparent contrast between her 'sexual innocence and sexual impact' (34). This idea of innocence, as yoked to her status as a 'dumb blonde', initially had a currency in relation to Sabrina, given that when first asked by the press to cite her vital statistics 'she looked puzzled', claiming to be unfamiliar with the phrase. But with a number of film precursors before her—precursors which set-up the representational paradigm of the blonde bombshell—Sabrina also ultimately came across as more knowing in her self (and sexual) promotion. It was reported in 1955 that she sent a note to one London newspaper which asked provocatively: 'Why all this fuss over Marilyn Monroe? I'm here now. Want to see *me*?' ('The BBC Goes Berserk') [emphasis in original].

If we follow Cook's argument, it is certainly possible to read Sabrina's construction as a blonde bombshell as expressing a particular set of anxieties surrounding female sexuality at the time. But what is at stake in the context of this article is how she also becomes a site upon which conceptions (and fears) are expressed about the still-emerging concept of *television* fame. In terms of the BBC Viewer Research Reports, the complaints about Sabrina's vulgarity and presence in *Before Your Very Eyes* were bolstered by the sense that her appearances were 'unnecessary', 'functionless' and a 'joke that had gone on too long' (although there were predictable gendered differences at work here, given that some men interviewed remarked how they would like 'to see *even more* of Sabrina) [original emphasis].<sup>6</sup> It is arguably this emphasis on a 'functionless' form of fame which most resonates most clearly with the gendered double-standard of contemporary celebrity (and we are again reminded of the cultural reception of 'Jordan'). Sabrina clearly becomes famous within a social and media economy which values women for their physical appearance, only to find herself derided for (very) successfully fulfilling this role. In fact, in examining the relationship between the different forms of written evidence, such as the BBC memos and then the press and viewer comments which framed her reception, it is not difficult to see the machinations of this logic in process. The first memo that mentions her casting simply reads that 'This is just to confirm that we are booking a VERY PRETTY GIRL (with good figure) for a walk on part—no—lines [emphasis in original]'.<sup>7</sup> These hierarchies of talent and gender were also encoded into the sketches in the show. In a 1956 sketch, Askey emerges from behind a curtain with a small doll, and explains to the audience that he is giving Sabrina acting lessons. He then passes the doll to Sabrina and tells her to 'emote', but she just giggles and shuffles off the stage (24 February, 1956). This idea of Sabrina being in training in order to pursue a more 'legitimate' profession and fame also permeated the fabric of the early press reports. During 'Build Up Week' we are told how she is 'also conscientiously . . . investing in daily dramatic and singing lessons' and Sabrina elaborated how 'I'm determined to stay in show business, so would like to learn something about it' ('The Sabrina Phenomenon').

Whilst it is important to situate Sabrina's construction in relation to the wider representational paradigm of the 1950s' blonde bombshell, what in part differentiates her from her filmic counterparts is the degree to which television's serialised nature perpetuates the *repeatability* (and thus entrenchment) of what is deemed to be such a vacuous and peripheral role. Whilst Diana Dors, Marilyn Monroe and Jayne Mansfield began in films where they are often simply cast as 'the attractive girl', they were later permitted to at least play 'characters' (and speaking ones at that). Sabrina's representational burden may well also be heavier in this respect if we subscribe to the idea of television perpetuating an elision of on/off-screen identity — trading on the sense that people are who they '*appear* to be' (Ellis). I return to the extent to which Sabrina's persona may complicate this conception, but what is striking about the perceived trajectory of her fame is how it subscribes to what is often positioned as a peculiarly contemporary configuration of celebrity: the aim is to achieve media visibility *before* trying out a range of potential career paths across different media platforms.

On one level, this conception of fame has emerged from debates about shifting versions of selfhood in late capitalist societies, as most famously articulated in Anthony Giddens' work on the 'reflexive project of the self', which understands self-identity as an ongoing process of enterprise and transformation in need of constant creation and 'work'. But it is also clear that such an image of self-advancement is especially rooted in the historical discourses and practices of femininity. As Laurie Ouellette and James Hay summarise:

[T]he production of femininity is an ongoing endeavour involving constant training and props, and in that sense it mirrors the perpetual self-invention and lifelong education promoted by [discourses of the reflexive self]. . .Historically lacking legitimate opportunities for socioeconomic mobility, women have had to rely on bodily self-improvement as a means to advancement and security within the heterosexual marketplace, and have often been condemned for doing so. . .(Ouellette and Hay 119)

Ouellette and Hay examine on a wider level how contemporary television in particular (makeover TV, Reality TV) engages its performative subjects and viewers as 'entrepreneurs of the self' (Ouellette and Hay 103). But given its emphasis on identity play and reinvention, it is not surprising that it is also celebrity culture, particularly in its female manifestations, that has become a key cultural site for analysis here (Feasey; Fairclough). From training and auditioning to plastic surgery interventions, female celebrities in particular must be engaged in a constant process of 'becoming' (Jones 12).

Although Norma Sykes does reshape her physical self upon her initial arrival in London (recall that she was considered too voluptuous for mainstream magazine modelling), this is clearly some distance from a culture in which the intervention of plastic surgery is both expected and routine. But 'Sabrina' is nevertheless imagined as a persona that is 'ripe' (in every sense) for multi-textual visibility—a mobile fame which transcended media borders—whilst she also operated as a malleable site for training, 'improvement' and development. The point here is not to simplistically collapse the differences between 'now' and 'then', nor the industrial, economic and cultural contexts to which they speak. Indeed, whilst the likes of 'Jordan' have at least been celebrated (by some commentators) as successful postfeminist businesswomen in their display of

entrepreneurial ambition ('Busty'), it is clear that Sabrina's efforts at self-fashioning were more policed and prescribed.

### 'If they want me to wiggle, I'll guess I'll wiggle': Agency and Image

In addition to conceptions of her physical excess, there appeared to be a constant anxiety that Sabrina's success, and thus her star power, would exceed the control of the television show in which she appeared. This is articulated literally ('Sabrina's success has got right out of control'), or through the comparisons between the star and a Frankenstein monster: 'I had even wondered if she was real flesh and blood. Or just a fancy, bosomy-style Frankenstein construction produced in BBC workshops had stuffed with old scripts' ('The Sabrina Phenomenon'; 'The BBC Goes Berserk'; 'The BBC Sacks Sabrina'). This hyperbolic image of Sabrina's manufacture, and the fear that this might somehow exceed the dictates of her makers, clearly required the coding of her femininity as 'monstrous'.

In early 1956, however, this question of institutional power surfaced explicitly when it was widely reported in the press that the BBC had sacked Sabrina. What is interesting here is less the 'authenticity' of the circumstances surrounding this event (which cannot be ascertained or measured), but how it contributes to an understanding the tensions and anxieties surrounding her persona. The star had apparently been contracted to appear in a touring comic show (a live show which was also being televised) called *Home James*, fronted by the comedian, Jimmy James. This role clearly traded upon the 'Sabrina' persona, with the significant inclusion of three speaking lines. But according to reports, Sabrina refused to go to Manchester (her home town) for rehearsals the day before the show began, as she felt that a rehearsal on the morning of the show would suffice. In the existing press reports she is quoted as saying that all she had to do was 'waggle [her]...hips' ('Sabrina Wants') and that this required limited rehearsal time. Furthermore, the promised three lines of dialogue failed to materialise, and Sabrina insisted that 'My first objection to my part in the show was that I had nothing to say. Once again I was the dumb blonde' ('Sabrina Wants'). With the fallout reported in the press, Jimmy James incorporated a gag about the struggle into the show itself: 'First she will and then she will not. It puts us in a spot. So Sabrina can keep silent and Corinne can do the lot' ('Sabrina Wants'). A 20-year-old model called Corinne Grey was hired to take her place, and it was revealingly commented in the press that:

*Corinne was properly humble. She had no dramatic aspiration: and did not get the three lines [either]...I have deputised for Sabrina before, though my 36-inch bust doesn't compare with hers,' Corinne commented with great modesty [my emphasis]. ('Sabrina: Lend Lease Nude')*

The sense that Sabrina was not 'properly humble' or respectful of the prescribed gender/performance categories allotted to her was also subsequently foregrounded in Askey's biography which recounted how she 'eventually became bigger (in every sense) than me in the show...The tail began to wag the dog, so she had to go' (Askey 164–5).

It does not seem unreasonable to suggest that there are suggestions of 'diva' behaviour here, and as Alexander Doty explains, 'divas are about category trouble—the breaking out of 'proper' culturally assigned' sex, gender, class and racial categories (Doty 4). Melissa Bradshaw observes how the concept of the diva marks a fundamentally 'misogynist response to female ambition and success. . . a cultural *reluctance* to imagine. . . achievement [original emphasis]' (Bradshaw 72). Of course, Sabrina is positioned as lacking the unique talent that in part functions to propel the diva to visibility, and which then in part mitigates reactions to the diva's apparently outrageous demands. But the debate surrounding Sabrina's sacking nevertheless activated other facets of the diva persona, including discourses of consumption. This also has a particular currency with respect to the construction of the blonde bombshell in the 1950s who, as Cook explains, is positioned as a 'transgressive figure driven by sexual desire and materialism', and is 'demonised or criminalised as an instrument of consumerism, even if she is celebrated for her independence' (Cook 169). Although Britain embraced the benefits of a post-war expansionist economy, there remained a distrust of rampant consumerism which was associated with the prevalent fears surrounding 'Americanisation' (not to mention the British investment in 'quality' and the distrust of the excesses of 'trashy popular culture' (Cook)). It thus seems significant that Sabrina's behaviour is positioned as being intertwined with her growing consumption—as made possible by the fruits of her celebrity rise. In addition to (apparently) refusing to go to Manchester the day before the opening of the show, it was also reported that the third class train ticket—allotted to Sabrina by the BBC—contributed to her refusal: 'Now, could a famous personage go home third class? Sabrina's breast really heaved-all 41 inches. She refused to rehearse' ('Sabrina: Lend Lease Nude'). The fact that this journey would also have been 'returning home' ('up North') only served to accentuate what was perceived as her problematic (class) rise, and we might note the long-standing narrative in star discourse which approves of staying true to one's class 'roots' (Dyer *Heavenly*). After all, Sabrina's celebrity lifestyle was indeed seen as luxurious:

Her average weekly income is now six times bigger than that of the man who discovered her, she rents a 15-guinea flat, employs a maid, an accountant and a secretary to deal with her 300 weekly fan letters. She has bought herself a £200 mink stole and is soon to acquire a high powered sports car with leopard-skin upholstery. ('One Look')

Based on the existing evidence, it appears that such items and riches are reported as being genuinely aspirational, rather than occasions to ridicule the star's cultural capital and taste. However, there is often the suggestion of a pretentious air in these discussions, and as Anita Biessi and Heather Nunn explain, 'pretentiousness is primarily a classed charge which calls aspirant. . . identities to order. . .' (Biessi and Nunn 121).

The idea of calling 'aspirant identities to order' resonates with the wider popular and institutional disciplining of Sabrina: in addition to Jimmy James' gag in the live show, the sacking was seen by the relevant BBC personnel as 'teaching her a lesson'.<sup>8</sup> This appears to have had the desired effect in media discourse at least: Sabrina is then positioned as occupying a position of retreat, withdrawing from a 'diva' identity in order to occupy the role of the ingénue or starlet in relation to the (male) 'impresario' of the BBC. As she explains, 'I know I am silly, but I would not be that stupid to insult the people that have made me famous. All I want to do is get back to the BBC', and 'the BBC are a big outfit and

I [don't]. . . want to fall out with them. If they want me to wiggle, I'll guess I'll wiggle' ('The BBC Sacks').

This statement is particularly fascinating in terms of how Sabrina's agency is negotiated. Her comment might be read as evidence of how female stars and celebrities can be 'actively encouraged to participate in [their]. . . own oppression' (Doane, cited in McLean 14). But the overt indication of reluctance (and the narrative of struggle which preceded it) means that we are offered a contradictory image of Sabrina in which she appears as both colluding with, and resisting, her own persona making (a tension also discussed at length in McLean's study of Hayworth, with the star seen as both a 'resisting social subject and a saleable commodity image' (McLean 14)). Indeed, although the suggestion of manufacture is usually cast as a negative discourse in celebrity construction (indicating a 'depreciation' in the value of fame), it is the emphasis on the fabrication process that provides a context for Sabrina to voice her resistance—even if this is only allowed at the moment of defeat, and the apparent surrender to the representational dictates of the blonde bombshell. To be sure, Cook observes how there is *always* a self-conscious element of masquerade about the blonde bombshell which presents a parody of femininity, 'a simulacrum rather than the real thing' (Cook 170). Yet, aside from the discussion of the reluctant 'wiggle', this element of performative construction is rarely acknowledged in the existing press discourse, except, we might note, in those that quote 'Sabrina' herself:

Most of the TV world now knows my real name is not Sabrina, but Norma Sykes . . . And my eternal problem IS that professionally I have to remain 'Sabrina'. Yet in my inner, private self I am Norma Sykes, whose head is not turned by all the luck I've had. ('What I Think'<sup>9</sup>)

The beckon to access a 'real' self separate from the public role is common in celebrity discourse, functioning as a key mechanism through which consumer interest is engaged. Yet 'Sabrina's' bid to negotiate a gap between these selves has particular implications here, both in terms of her significance for conceptual and historical approaches to television fame, and with regard to how these paradigms are inflected by discourses of gender.

As Christine Becker observes, the conceptual paradigms which set out the apparent specificities of television celebrity have also worked to 'denigrate the stature of television stardom' ('Televising' 9). After all, the emphasis on a close coincidence between on/off-screen persona, which seeks to offer the impression that the person is just 'being themselves', effectively evacuates the importance of skill, talent and work (see also Bennett, 2008), and historical work has largely corroborated this view (Medhurst; Murray). Yet this should surely raise questions about the relationship between the conceptual and the historical here: to what extent do such conceptual paradigms, which might well be conceived as *ahistorical*, serve to limit the interpretations and possibilities of historical research? To what extent should historical case studies now feed back into conceptual models of television fame?

It is not that the case study of Sabrina necessarily challenges these paradigms: her celebrity indeed plays out acute anxieties surrounding the cultural value of television fame, whilst there is also the insistence that she display a homology between on/off-screen self—maintaining the persona of the 'dumb blonde'. But at the very least, such

paradigms of television fame are clearly far from objective, neatly transferable (across personae) or apolitical, and as this historical case study shows, the desire to dissolve a distinction between the 'real' and the role takes place within existing inequities of ideological power—in this instance, gender and class. The deeply gendered nature of Sabrina's route to visibility, and the demand that she remain who she first appeared to be, allowed little space for development or manoeuvre. Indeed, any efforts to forge a gap or *distance* between the performative image of 'Sabrina' and the aspirations of Norma Sykes came from the star herself.

## Conclusion

Despite Norma's efforts to forge a distance between on and off screen identities, minor film roles in 1955–8 (for which 'Sabrina' nevertheless received prominent star billing), capitalised on, or spoofed off, her television image. In *Blue Murder at St Trinians*, Sabrina appears wordlessly as the school swot, reclining on a bed whilst reading Dostoevsky, and in *Stock Car*, she appears as the 'glamorous girlfriend', and her words (this was her first speaking role) were dubbed over with a cockney accent. In terms of the immediate succeeding years, she returned to *Before Your Very Eyes*, and she also appeared in the series *Living it Up* (ITV, 1957–8), the TV sitcom based on the popular radio series, *Band Waggon*.<sup>10</sup> In fact, by 1957 critics were talking of the 'The Sabrina Survival': 'Amazing? Because at this time last year the talk was like this: "She'll never last. She's not a real star. She's a freak who'll fade overnight"' ('The Amazing'). Similar pronouncements were of course made in relation to the recently deceased British reality TV star, Jade Goody,<sup>11</sup> who was not only initially reviled for her 'vulgar' corporeal 'excess', which brought together misogyny and class prejudice (see Biressi and Nunn), but who also became the most visible cultural site in Britain for contemporary debates and anxieties about the nature of modern fame.

This article has primarily concentrated on the relationship between celebrity, gender and cultural value, but it has also aimed to illustrate the need for more *historical* case studies to enrich our map of celebrity culture, and the need to think more boldly about the dialogue between past and present. Furthermore, and particularly with respect to television, it has also suggested the need for canonical (conceptual) paradigms of television fame to be situated in, and inflected by, the knowledge we can generate from historical case studies and contexts. Indeed, what is perhaps most striking here is how, for a subject that is literally defined by public visibility, much of its history remains unknown.

## Notes

1. Katie Price, who previously went by the name of 'Jordan', is a former British glamour model who initially became famous for the extraordinary size of her surgically enhanced breasts. Functioning as a TV personality, author, singer and business woman, she continues to be one of the most pervasive tabloid celebrities in Britain.
2. <http://nylon.net/sabrina/life/sabrinalife.htm>
3. Nest Bradley to Head of Publicity, 29 September 1958. T16/168/2, BBC Written Archive Centre (WAC).

4. Tom Sloan to Leslie Jackson, 21 December 1955, TV Art 2 Sabrina.
5. BBC Audience Research Report, *Before Your Very Eyes*, 2 May 1955.
6. BBC Audience Research Report, *Before Your Very Eyes*, 13 March 1955.
7. Doreen Wilson to Tom Sloan, 27 February 1953, TV12/18/2.
8. Tom Sloan to Teddy Foster, 24 April 1956, TV Art 2 Sabrina.
9. I only found one critic that noted how Sabrina was, of course, a 'character' ('How Far').
10. For a detailed account of her subsequent career, up until the present day, see <http://nylon.net/sabrina/life/sabrinallife.htm>, which also includes a number of archival documents. 14 April 2009.
11. After coming fourth in the third series of the UK *Big Brother*, Jade Goody ultimately became British reality TV's first millionaire. Loud, brash, 'dim', 'vulgar' and bitchy, Goody's fame was always controversial, and she was the subject of tabloid attacks on her weight, physical appearance and perceived lack of education. Although reclaimed by some as something of a 'national treasure', her visibility was cut short when she died of cervical cancer in 2008 at the age of 29.

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