‘A Monument to Youth and Romance’: The Death of Rudolph Valentino

In 1923 Sir James George Frazer published an abridged edition of his great history of myth and religion, *The Golden Bough*. The third part, ‘The Dying God’, explored the practice in some early cultures of requiring a king or god to perish at the hands of their successor, citing the deaths of Apollo and Dionysus in Greek mythology as illustrative reference points. ‘The man-god must be killed as soon as he shews symptoms that his powers are beginning to fail,’ Frazer wrote, ‘and his soul must be transferred to a vigorous successor before it has been seriously impaired by the threatened decay’. Reprinting the preface from the 1911 edition, the author contextualises this ‘crude but pathetic attempt to disengage an immortal spirit from its mortal envelope’ for his readers in terms of the rapidly changing world of the early-twentieth Century. The death of the man-god, Frazer explains, is an extreme attempt to preserve the element of the divine that the man-god embodies, and ensure the preservation of ‘youth’s fleeting roses ever fresh and fair’. However, he warns the reader not to ‘smile’ at the vanity of those impulses and points to a more contemporary relevance for the search to achieve the immortal and cheat the ‘ominous symptoms of decay’. In the face of modernity with its opening up of ‘endless vistas of knowledge…even within our own generation’, Frazer refers to the hope that some ‘loop-hole of escape’ might be discovered, which may have been ever more pressing for his post-war readers. Frazer evokes a deep-felt yearning that perhaps informs the star structures discussed in this book:

[gl]roping about in the darkness, mankind may yet chance to lay hands on: ‘that golden key that opens the place of eternity,’ and so to pass from this world of shadows and sorrow to a world of untroubled light and joy. If this is a dream, it is surely a happy and innocent
one, and to those who would wake us from it we may murmur with Michael Angelo, ‘però non mi destar, deh! parla basso’.²

What is Frazer evoking here if not another ‘flight to antiquity’, an escape towards the ideals of youth untouched by ruin and decay? With his discourse of a dark shadowland where figures of light divine offer troubled individuals a chance of escape, he could easily be describing the mechanisms of stardom itself. Frazer’s quotation from Michelangelo is apt too, for the artist’s words ‘So do not wake me! Speak softly’, are those he gave one of his sculptures, ‘Night’ (c. 1524), which frames a funerary monument in the Basilica of San Lorenzo, Florence. Kenneth Gross describes these words as possessing the ‘ghostly voice of an epigraph’ that touches on the moments when the viewer pauses to consider the sculpture and sympathises for the ‘invisible pains of a sleeping sufferer’. The sculpture here desires not Pygmalionesque animation, but to be left alone with the blissful senselessness that offers an ‘escape from duress’.³

Rudolph Valentino died on 23 August 1926. His death, following complications caused by appendicitis and gastric ulcers, was announced to unprecedented levels of press coverage and expressions of public shock, morbid curiosity and disbelief, disbelief not only that the star had died in such a public and protracted way over the past eight days, but that this event was apparently felt so deeply by so many. ‘Death of the Idol of the Picture Palaces’, ran a typical headline the morning after his demise.⁴ That the impact of the star’s death was felt to be a matter more of hysteria than ‘true’ grief by others, only reinforced the sense that something had happened that was very difficult to rationalise. However, as Mark Lynn Anderson recently observed, descriptions of the riots that met Valentino’s death have become a biographical cliché that allows writers to side-line the crowd for the irrationality they displayed towards this ‘false idol’ and neglect the wider cultural reception of those audiences.⁵

I have discussed elsewhere the way the ownership of Valentino’s memory was contested by fans in the years following his death. These were powerful expressions of feeling and also belief, and witnessed women in particular self-representing themselves in ways far from the passively reacting figures often described.⁶ The conflagration of star discourse that greeted his death was perhaps no surprise given the aforementioned valorisation of youth in post-war culture, here fragmenting to reveal a backward gaze to the kind of minor-key classicism that had mourned the fallen during the war. Equally, for a period that often turned to forms of belief alternative to organised religion, Valentino’s death was met with a proliferation of spiritualist articles in the film press that