

## *April 10: Celebrity Science: the Making of Marie Curie*

### **Abstract:**

In 2005, the television audience of France 2 placed Marie Curie fourth on the list of the ten "Plus Grand Français de tous les temps," trailing De Gaulle, Pasteur and l'Abbé Pierre, but preceding comedian Coluche. Posterity has mythologized the two French scientists on that France 2 list in analogous ways. Both have been targets of successful biographies authored by close relatives: her daughter, his son-in-law (who wrote the book while Pasteur was still alive). Both were immortalized by Hollywood; Pasteur by Paul Muni in the Oscar-awarded *The Story of Louis Pasteur* from 1936, Marie Curie by Greer Garson in the 1943 MGM-production of *Madame Curie*. Yet, there are few signs of a "Curiefication" along the lines of the "Pasteurization" that has situated Pasteur and his discoveries within a larger network comprised of objects, agents and institutions. One possible reason might be that in contrast to Pasteur, Curie resists abstraction. Exploring, even embracing, Pasteur's individuality and personality poses no real threat to a critical investigation using The Man to get at The World, simply because a male scientist can always function as a catalyst for *generalizable* observations about science. He *fits*, even as a misfit. Curie, on the other hand, circulates in the closed loop reserved for a specific historical actor, whose experience as a *woman* is so unique that it cannot be abstracted or generalized. As a result, the only story Marie Curie can tell us is the one about her. Period. Compared to an umbrella-toting Mary Poppins, referred to as the Edith Piaf of radioactivity, even likened to Victor Hugo's Cosette, Curie may be malleable enough to be anyone, real or fictitious, as long as she remains an extraordinary outsider. As much as possible, I want to resist this diminishing logic that situates her as a woman first, a person only second, and a catalyst for generalizable observations on the conditions of modern science a distant third. In this first of my two talks I want to draw out some of the problems and challenges involved in my ongoing book project *Making Marie Curie: Intellectual Property, Celebrity Culture, and the Power of Print* (under advance contract with the University of Chicago Press). I will address the cultural construction of the Curie *persona*, look at claims of authorship and intellectual *property* made in the name of the person/persona Curie and finally, consider the role of *print* culture in underwriting these features.