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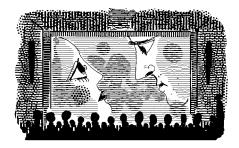


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SHADOW PLAY by Martha Bayles



Elizabethan Virtues

N THE 1873 EDITION OF THE ENGLISH Constitution, Walter Bagehot argued that in order to "exercise a wide sway" over the "mixed population" enfranchised by the Reform Act of 1867, the British government must maintain both "dignified parts" and "efficient parts." The dignified parts were the tradition and pomp of the monarchy, which served to distract "the vacant many" from the workings of Parliament, the Cabinet, and the House of Commons—the efficient parts that were dull and incomprehensible to the "common ordinary mind." As he wrote, "[R] oyalty is a government in which the attention of the nation is concentrated on one person doing interesting actions. A Republic is a government in which that attention is divided between many, who are all doing uninteresting actions."

If Bagehot were alive today, he would doubtless applaud the British media for still upholding this distinction. For those who can follow politics, print and broadcast outlets provide plenty of news coverage and debate. For those who cannot, these same outlets, guided by the BBC and the Royal Communications Office, provide a steady flow of hagiographic headlines and deferential documentaries about the monarchy, the royal family, and Queen Elizabeth II, still a paragon of dignity at 91. Seeing all this, Bagehot would have no reason to revise his claim that "a royal family sweetens politics by the seasonable addition of nice and pretty events."

But of course, this is not the whole picture. Bagehot would also see masses of ordinary Britons spellbound by a never-ending media spectacle of shameless, corrupt, undignified, and inefficient behavior by their "betters," whether peers, prime ministers,

or politicians—even royals at times. As a sophisticated Victorian, he would likely be more shocked by the public exposure of such behavior than by the behavior itself. But he would also wonder about how the public's fondness for "nice and pretty events" got downgraded to a bottomless appetite for swill

Here in America we may wonder about the same thing, as we behold the violence, vulgarity, and vitriol of our own media spectacle. Would we be better off with a monarch? The British actor Stephen Fry thinks so: in a Fourth of July message in the New York Times, he jokingly suggests that America should "choose an Uncle Sam or Aunt Samantha" and give him or her "the powers of a constitutional sovereign," so that every week the president would be reminded that he serves "a bigger idea than power, a nobler entity than a political party or a trending ideology."

It is sometimes remarked that the American equivalent of royalty is celebrity, with the megastars of sports and entertainment standing in for dukes and duchesses, princes and princesses. But as any loyal subject of Queen Elizabeth II can attest, this ignores a crucial difference. In the words of British journalist Andrew Marr: "Celebrities court the camera, they open up. The Queen is not a celebrity. The cameras court *her*, and she *doesn't.*"

Marr made this comment as host of *The Diamond Queen*, one of the better documentaries churned out by the BBC. Consciously or not, Marr was echoing Bagehot's insight that the chief contribution of the modern monarchy is to dignify the efficient but grubby business of parliamentary politics. Strikingly, that same insight provides a use-

ful yardstick by which to judge the seriousness and artistic merit of countless film and TV treatments of the British monarchy—in particular, of the two great queens named Elizabeth.

As an unmarried, childless woman, Elizabeth I has the dubious distinction of having inspired quite a few un-serious, un-artistic films. Her only rival in this is her father, Henry VIII, with his six ill-fated wives. But in most films about Henry, a favorite bit of dramatic irony is to show him bemoaning his lack of a suitable male heir while the red-haired toddler Elizabeth cavorts in the background. So let us begin with her.

Elizabeth I: Beyond the Queen's Sex Life

In 16TH-CENTURY ENGLAND, DIGNITY and efficiency were united in the crown, and Elizabeth I was mistress of both. Yet this achievement has mattered less to most filmmakers than her sex life, or lack thereof. In 1912 there was a French silent film called Les Amours de la reine Élisabeth. Over the decades there have appeared three productions entitled The Virgin Queen (1923, 1955, 2005), each to some degree depicting Elizabeth I as a sex-starved sourpuss with the gall to grow old without benefit of modern dentistry.

Less insulting are the two crowd-pleasers starring Cate Banchett: Elizabeth (1998) and Elizabeth: The Golden Age (2007). Thanks largely to Blanchett, both films have some stirring moments. But they, too, are obsessed with the queen's love life—indeed, they distort history so as to keep her well supplied with suitors and thwarted romances until finally, at the end of the second film, she cuts her hair, paints her face white, and announces that henceforth she will be "married to Eng-

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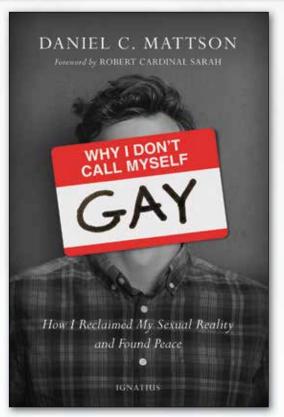
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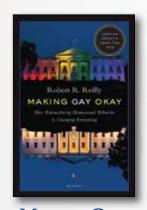
Approaches to Same-Sex Attraction

aniel Mattson believed he was gay. From an early age, he was attracted to other males even though he was raised in a Christian family. Finding the conflict between his sexual desires and the teachings of his church too great, he assumed he was gay, turned his back on God, and began a sexual relationship with another man. Yet freedom and happiness remained elusive until he discovered Christ and his true masculine identity.

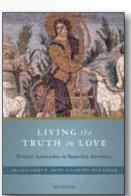
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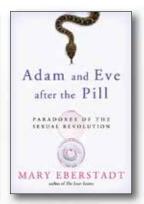
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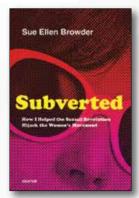
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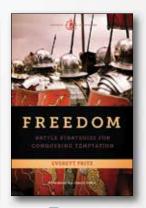


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Mentioned in this essay:

The Diamond Queen, directed by Sally Norris. BBC

Les Amours de la reine Élisabeth, directed by Louis Mercanton and Henri Desfontaines. Screenplay by Émile Moreau. L'Histrionic Film

The Virgin Queen (1923), directed by J. Stuart Blackton. Screenplay by Harry Pirie Gordon. Rose

The Virgin Queen (1955), directed by Henry Koster. Screenplay by Harry Brown and Mindret Lord. 20th Century Fox

The Virgin Queen (2005), directed by Coky Giedroyc. Screenplay by Paula Milne. BBC

Elizabeth, directed by Skekhar Kapur. Screenplay by Michael Hirst. Gramercy Pictures

Elizabeth: The Golden Age, directed by Skekhar Kapur. Screenplay by William Nicholson and Michael Hirst. Universal Pictures The Tudors, created by Michael Hirst. Sony Pictures Television

Elizabeth R, created by Roderick Graham. BBC

Elizabeth I, directed by Tom Hooper. Screenplay by Nigel Williams. All3Media

A Royal Night Out, directed by Julian Jarrold. Screenplay by Trevor de Silva and Kevin Hood. Lionsgate

The King's Speech, directed by Tom Hooper. Screenplay by David Seidler. The Weinstein Company

The Queen, by Stephen Frears. Screenplay by Peter Morgan. Pathé

The Crown, created by Peter Morgan. Netflix

King Charles III, directed by Rupert Goold. Screenplay by Mike Bartlett. BBC

land." (The real reason for the face paint was scarring from smallpox.)

Subtract Blanchett and you have the Showtime series *The Tudors* (2007-10), described by its creator, Michael Hirst, as "an entertainment, a soap opera, and not history." At this level, only a few tweaks and costume changes would be needed to set the same soap opera in, say, imperial Vienna, colonial Argentina, or plutocratic Azerbaijan. All it takes is a powerful man desperate for a male heir treating everyone badly until he dies and is succeeded by his neglected but brilliant daughter.

If the rule is films and TV series that fail to do justice to Elizabeth I, then there are two notable exceptions: the 1971 BBC series *Elizabeth R*, starring Glenda Jackson; and the 2005 series, *Elizabeth I*, starring Helen Mirren, co-produced by HBO and Channel Four Television Corporation.

For its time, the Glenda Jackson series had a generous budget. But most of the money must have been spent on Jackson's costumes, because the rest of the production has a bargain-basement look compared with today's high-definition eye candy. But the great strength of the BBC, then and now, is superb writing and acting—and there is plenty of both in this portrayal of a queen whose craving for love is only a small part of a larger political context.

My only criticism of Jackson's carefully etched performance is that she etched it in frost. For a warmer portrayal, we have Mirren's amazing performance in *Elizabeth I*, a two-part series that presents the queen as a classical paragon of developed virtue—a hotblooded soul, quick to anger and foolish in love, who is nonetheless capable of recognizing and curbing her passions. The Elizabethans were not romantics: they did not delude themselves into trusting the heart over the head. This series, the best of the lot, makes vivid the struggle of a monarch to rule herself so that she might rule others.

Elizabeth II: In the Spotlight

URNING TO ELIZABETH II, WE FIND an overwhelming volume of material. From the BBC alone there is endless footage showing her majesty meeting and greeting every human being on the planet (and possibly some extra-terrestrials, though I've not had time to check). There is also a filmed record of nearly a century's worth of coronations, weddings, funerals, public ceremonies, and Jubilees Silver, Golden, Diamond, and Sapphire (the latter observed privately). Yet despite all this, there is a dearth of fictionalized portrayals. One website listing the "best movie versions of Elizabeth II" contains only seven items—and they include episodes from The Simpsons and news video of her majesty arriving in at the 2012 London Olympics in a helicopter.

Of feature films, there are three: A Royal Night Out (2015), a fluffy, made-up tale about Elizabeth and her sister Margaret venturing

incognito into the V-E Day revels in London; The King's Speech (2010), about their beloved father "Bertie" (King George VI) overcoming his stammer, in which Elizabeth appears as a 13-year-old; and The Queen (2006), about the Royal Family's reaction to the 1997 death of Princess Diana. Of these, only The Queen takes a serious look at Elizabeth II the monarch.

Written by Peter Morgan, a gifted screen-writer whose immigrant background (Polish Catholic mother, German Jewish father) may have endowed him with a certain distance on British royalty, *The Queen* stars Helen Mirren in another amazing (and Oscar-winning) performance as a deeply traditional sovereign resisting, then gradually bending to, a tsunami of pressure from the media—and her prime minister, Tony Blair—to make a public show of grief at the death in a car crash of the former Princess Diana.

Reviewing the film at the time ("Reel Queens," CRB, Winter 2006-07), I quoted several American critics who simply assumed it was about a stuffy old lady being clueless. One of the more obtuse was Manohla Dargis of the New York Times, who praised The Queen's "sublimely nimble evisceration of that cult of celebrity known as the British royal family."

This is exactly backwards. If the royal family is a cult, it is a cult of dignity, not celebrity. Having lived her whole life in the spotlight, Elizabeth II did not find the media circus surrounding Diana's death "bewildering." On the





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contrary, she knew that circus all too well. As a child, she had seen her uncle, King Edward VIII (better known as the Duke of Windsor) become tabloid fodder when he abdicated to marry the American divorcée Wallis Simpson. As a young woman, she had seen the same thing happen to her impulsive younger sister, Princess Margaret. And all that before Charles married Diana.

Dignity vs. Celebrity

Morgan went on to write a play, The Audience, imagining a typical weekly "audience" between her majesty and ten of the 13 prime ministers who have served her. That play subsequently became the basis for The Crown, an ambitious new TV series created by Morgan and projected to last six seasons, one for each decade of Elizabeth II's reign. Notably, The Crown is being produced not by the BBC-PBS partnership that typically brings British fare to our shores, but by the lowly yet deep-pocketed Netflix.

In the excellent first season, *The Crown* subtly probes the ways in which the modern cult of celebrity has upset the balance between dignity and efficiency. Early on, we see the young Princess Elizabeth (Claire Foy) being tutored in Bagehot's distinction by the vice-provost of Eton. We also see that she needs no tutoring in this matter, because she is witness to the contrast between her uncle, the Duke of Windsor (Alex Jennings), who relinquishes the throne but continues to court the camera; and her father, George VI (Jared Harris), who stoically assumes the throne—and barely tolerates the camera courting him.

In the aforementioned BBC documentary, The Diamond Queen, host Andrew Marr describes Edward VIII as "the bad king, the Windsor who got it wrong. Vain and self-indulgent, he demonstrated that charisma, while useful in politics and art, is a dangerous confection for a constitutional monarch." To Americans old enough to remember the romantic Duke of Windsor, this sounds a bit churlish. What could this handsome, dashing fellow who gave it all up for love have possibly done wrong?

Here's what I admire most about *The Crown*: in sympathetic human terms, it shows precisely what Edward got wrong. It was not that he attracted the spotlight—kings and queens cannot help doing that. Rather it was that he liked it too much. We see this in the scene where he and Wallis (Lia Williams) allow a magazine crew into their recently acquired mansion in the Bois de Boulogne.

When the reporter asks for "some tips for entertaining," Wallis turns to Edward aghast: "Did we agree to that?" Carelessly he replies, "We did, darling, yes. They paid extra."

Even more sympathetic, but equally judgmental, is The Crown's portrayal of Princess Margaret (Vanessa Kirby), another charismatic moth drawn to the celebrity flame. The first season traces Margaret's truncated romance with Royal Air Force Group Captain Peter Townsend (Ben Miles), whom she meets when he is serving as equerry to King George VI. When Elizabeth becomes queen, Margaret seeks her permission to marry. But because Peter is divorced, Elizabeth urges the pair to separate and wait two years until Margaret is 25 and no longer needs royal permission. But it quickly becomes clear that, while Elizabeth is stoic enough to bear such a burden, Margaret is not.

And neither is Peter Townsend. This is revealed in the sequence where he accompanies the queen on a visit to Northern Ireland, and when they arrive, he is besieged by reporters asking about his relationship with Margaret. Again, the problem is not the attention (that's a constant) but Peter's response. When he smiles for the camera in a manner more befitting a film star than a future royal, the extent of the damage may not be visible to us Yanks. But to Elizabeth, it is glaring.

It is too soon to tell whether the dignity of the British monarchy will survive the age of celebrity. If you have seen the "future history" film King Charles III (2017), then perhaps you can imagine the monster media circus that would ensue if there were any doubt about who will succeed Elizabeth II. We don't have this problem in America, because we don't have a queen. On the other hand, we no longer have a president who considers it part of his job to maintain a certain dignity. If we blame Bill Clinton for eroding that dignity, then we must also blame Donald Trump.

All of Elizabeth II's possible successors have seen their dignity eroded by the celebrity culture of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. What's truly troubling, on both sides of the Pond, is that this damage to dignity may also be damage to efficiency. It is mysterious, the bond between the ritual trappings of monarchs (and presidents) and the mundane machinery of government. But it is also quite real. At a time when large numbers of people are more riveted by spectacles of shamelessness than by displays of dignity, we need to remind ourselves: celebrity is not just another coat of varnish on an old and pretty picture. It is an acid with the power to corrode.

