

Celebrity, Performance, and Aging: The shaping of Attitude and Expression in  
Modern Culture

*The Queen*, aging femininity and the recuperation of the monarchy

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Placing nationalism firmly in the social and cultural, Benedict Anderson suggests that mass print media is pivotal to the longitudinal emergence of an ‘imagined political community [that is] imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign’ (p.6) in that it enables people separated both temporally and spatially to imagine that they have common bonds. Anderson’s concept of a mediated “imagined community” works equally well in relation to technologies such as film, television and the world wide web - and their complex interfaces – since it can be argued that the global reach of this complex media web is a necessary precursor to ongoing formulations of nationalism’s limited sovereignty. Anderson also suggests that the decline of monarchy is a general trait of nationalism. However, with its resilient monarchy, British nationalism runs counter to this general trend. Indeed, the discursive construction of the monarchy as a centuries old continuity that transcends the vagaries of time and the fortunes of economic and political shifts plays a key role in securing the hegemony of British nationalism. However, this link between the monarchy and British nationalism is contested and was severely threatened in the late 1990s when as many as 50% of Britons were expressing republican views. Yet, from the low point of 1997 (or high point for those of republican persuasions) the monarchy is now restored to its institutionalised position as a central plank in constructions of British nationalism, suggesting that the rehabilitation of the monarchy in British public opinion is one of the most successful hegemonic moves in recent decades.

Whilst, that rehabilitation has played out in a web of global media interfaces that are virtually unfathomable in their complexity, it is possible to isolate specific examples of popular media texts that both exemplify, and contribute to, these recuperative processes. One such is the 2006 film, *The Queen*. This paper will argue that representations of the eponymous Queen as an aging woman caught in the publicity maelstrom of celebrity Princess Diana work in favour of the monarchy and are integral to its rehabilitation. The focus of this essay thus moves beyond the dominant concerns of feminist cultural approaches to women, ageing and media, such as Chivers, Whelehan and Woodward, that typically aim to “bring the subject of the older woman into visibility” (Woodward xvi). Instead, attention is drawn to some of the ideological effects that are mobilised when an ageing female figure, the eponymous Queen, is the visible focus of celebrity culture implied by the biopic genre.

Thanks to publicity gained from nominations and prestigious awards from the likes of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (the Oscars), The British Academy of Film and Television Arts, and the Venice Film Festival, the reach of *The Queen* is impressive in that even people who have not seen it know that it tells the story of that tumultuous week following the death of royal celebrity, Princess Diana. The film repeatedly reiterates discourses claiming that this was the moment when British public opinion turned against the monarchy and the fate of the institution hinged on the negotiating skills of the newly elected Prime Minister, Tony Blair, in resolving a clash between popular modernity, represented by Princess Diana, and unpopular tradition, represented by the Queen. In this play between modernity and tradition, the film implies an alignment between modernity, youth and celebrity culture that is antagonistic to tradition, ageing and a culture of dutiful restraint. The film purports to represent the processes through which this tear in the seam of nation is sutured by the Queen, as she reluctantly bends to the wishes of the people.

Following from George F Custen, *Bio/pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History*, it is vital to recognise that the biopic's claims to transparently represent history through a re-presentation of the life of a coherent and knowable subject are ideological glosses that efface the mediations of historical discourse – in which the biopic itself is fully embedded. Additionally, Richard Dyer's suggestions that film stars are ideologically saturated semiotic systems that seemingly point to a *real* person behind the mediated image are highly pertinent in relation to royalty as much as they are to stardom. In this context, whilst *The Queen* purports to transparently portray the *real* person, Elizabeth II, it actually reiterates and remediates those discourses through which the royal persona, Elizabeth II, is constituted. Simultaneously, an interface is forged with those that constitute the film's star, Helen Mirren, thus producing a character called, the Queen, which ostensibly represents the *real* Elizabeth II. In order to avoid reiterating the elisions and ideological slippages that suggest a fixed and knowable *real* that can be transparently re-presented, throughout this article, *The Queen* refers to the film title, the Queen refers to the character played by Helen Mirren, Queen Elizabeth II refers to the discursively constituted royal persona of that name.

## Royalty, biopics and “showing” the truth

Since the earliest days, English speaking film makers have deployed the history of royals for its ability to offer the pleasures of cinematic spectacle, through lavish costume and interior spaces, whilst also exploiting the salacious potential of exhibiting the private lives of royalty. As early as 1895 film makers were offering reconstructions of historical events in films such as *The Execution of Mary Queen of Scots* and in 1912 Sarah Bernhardt made a highly acclaimed screen appearance in the title role of *Queen Elizabeth*. By the 1930s, in the context of the studio system that had perfected assembly line methods of film production, Hollywood’s economic and cultural domination of the global film market was supported by the exploitation of genre films including the biopic and its royal sub-category, through films such as *The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex*, *The Virgin Queen*. At the same time, following the international box-office success of *The Private Life of Henry VIII*, British film makers recognised the potential of royal heritage films to penetrate the lucrative American market. Thus, from the 1930s onwards, film makers on both sides of the Atlantic capitalised on the popularity of royal spectacle.

Tracing a history of the Hollywood biopic, George F. Custen suggests that the genre is central to the writing of public history because they are often “the only source of information many people will have on a given historical subject” (7). As Custen reminds us, regardless of any intentions of objectivity, the production of history is never a neutral occupation. Rather the writing of history is heavily mediated by the multiple interactions, transcriptions and interpretations of record making. However, the biopic is particularly effective in glossing over the mediations of historical representation because of cinematic verisimilitude – the ability of film to look like life. As with documentary film, which despite well established arguments to the contrary by the likes of Michael Renov is often assumed to be an unmediated representation of reality, the biopic supports a widespread belief that film transparently *shows* events and people and can provide neutral re-enactments of social action – in effect – to tell the truth. With biopics, this belief is fostered by avowals of accuracy and truth that trace through publicity material and on-screen action. It is not uncommon to see biopic publicity signalling an authoritative source – a primary document such as a

diary, a respected print biography or even the advice of an eye-witness. In some respects biopics are strikingly similar to documentary film - which Bill Nicholls suggests generates belief in a didactic communication circuit involving “[...] an organizing agency that possesses information and knowledge, a text that conveys it, and a subject who will gain it” (31). With *The Queen*, popular memory of Princess Diana’s death also triggers a mass, eye-witness understanding of events. Throughout the film, re-enactments of events are intermittently spliced with archive footage from the represented period that ostensibly bears testimony to the narrative’s veracity and acts as a reminder that *this* is how it was. If further weight were needed to support this intersection of public aide memoir and assurances of authenticity, the DVD version of *The Queen* opens with replays of news reports and documentary footage announcing the death of Diana juxtaposed to the public’s shocked response on hearing (and seeing) the news. Thus, the truth telling communication circuit works as a process of confirmation of that which we already know.

Additionally, as with “quality” costume dramas, biopics are marketed in terms of attention paid to details such as finding the “right” location, sourcing authentic props and producing costumes that copy the minutiae of period clothing - even for under garments that can not be seen. Contemporary films such as *The Queen* are no exception. Film critic Manhola Dragis praises director, Stephen Frears for the “[...] lapidary attention to visual detail” used to illustrate the week of Diana’s funeral (*The Queen* homepage), and the authenticity of costume is a recurring publicity motif. For instance, the film’s trivia pages on specialist internet site IMDB, note that jewellery worn by Mirren is,

[...] based on actual jewels owned by Elizabeth II. Some pieces shown include: her trademark 2 or 3 strands of pearls, Queen Victoria’s bow brooch (at Diana’s funeral), and Queen Mary’s button earrings (the large pearl earrings each topped by a tiny diamond.).

Mirren herself suggests that part of her success as Elizabeth II stems from the effects of luxurious copies of the royal wardrobe, such as silk lined cashmere cardigans, that establish for the wearer an immediate sense of privilege and self possession. Meanwhile, a rise in American sales of Barbour jackets and Hermes scarves has been attributed to the publicity gained from the film’s use of “authentic” costume. The key

point here is that the biopic merges discourses of truth telling with those of authenticity in its promise to *show* how it was.

As well as being framed by external cross referencing strategies, biopics are also heavily reliant on validations of truth mobilised by intertextual references embedded within the film text itself. For instance, in *The Queen* these range from images of written documents, newspaper headlines, television newscasts, voiceovers - all of which proclaim the accuracy and truth of the re-enactment unfolding on the screen. All of this is foregrounded in the film's publicity trailer which begins with archive news footage announcing the death of Princess Diana: footage that is overlaid with the strap line – "ON AUGUST 30<sup>TH</sup> 1997 ONE STORY SHOOK THE WORLD...ANOTHER WAS NEVER TOLD". Thus a promise that the film will dramatise the story of Diana's death and funeral, whilst also revealing hitherto unknown secrets, is embedded in the discursive framing of *The Queen*.

The veracity of these untold secrets is established during the film's establishing credit sequence. During re-enactments of Blair's (Martin Sheen) election victory there is a cut to Helen Mirren posing *as* Elizabeth II and posing *for* a painted portrait. It is a stroke of film making genius that this image draws attention to Mirren's dramatic performance, whilst simultaneously transforming that performance into a believable facsimile of Elizabeth II. At a stroke [of a paint brush] Mirren is effectively melded with the figure of Elizabeth II, and the character, The Queen, is produced. Crucially, the painting of the portrait offers a strategic reminder that this film is just one of many representations of Elizabeth II, that she has been repeatedly represented in a variety of media and that 'likeness' is mediated through aesthetic choices and through comparisons between the different life stages of an ageing monarch. Even as the portrait in *The Queen* refers to both Elizabeth II, and Mirren playing the part of Elizabeth II, the sitter's regalia offers a subtle reference to the 1956 Annigoni portrait that became one of the most familiar representations of Elizabeth II for generations of Britons since it adorned public buildings of all kinds during the 1960s and 1970s. Effectively, the youthful Elizabeth II and the lengthy reign that links youthful and older images of Elizabeth II are invoked.

Moreover, during conversation with the portrait artist (Earl Cameron) the Queen suggests that she would once like to vote – "for the sheer joy of being partial". Instantly, this scene rearticulates the dominant and habitual discourse of the British monarchy's institutionalised impartiality. Given the ready elision between impartiality

and truthfulness, the Queen is positioned as a privileged and trustworthy participant in the events about to unfold. If, as Custen suggests, for most people, the biopic is the only source of history on a given subject, it is a source that ostensibly offers unmediated access to actual events – not simply telling but also *showing* the truth – then it follows that the biopic is a particularly effective ideological tool.

There are several aspects to be considered here. Firstly, if the truth of the story is placed beyond reproach, any ideological framing is similarly positioned. To put it another way, the underlying ideology of a biopic accrues the truth status accorded to its subject matter. Furthermore, the individuating tendency of the biopic has particular implications for the genre's ideological import. Whether made for cinema or TV, mainstream “true stories” such as *The Queen*, are organised around a central, individual protagonist who carries the burden of broader social pressures – it is the Queen and not the monarchy, it is Tony Blair and not the government who is placed at the centre of action. Consequently, biopics are also organised around individualised cause and effect occurrences that lead inexorably to a tidy resolution at story's end. Thus, even when cinematic biography places a politician or ruler of state at the centre of events, politics are reduced to the level of individual problems and responses, whilst intractable social issues are given the gloss of being already resolved – the debate has taken place and a solution already found. Overall then, I am suggesting that the ideological underpinnings of biopics such as *The Queen*, are especially powerful since they accrue the gloss of truth telling: a gloss that resonates with the genre's capacity to imply a cessation of political tensions. This, as I will go on to argue, is central to the film's depiction of the modernisation of the monarchy through the persona of an ageing Queen Elizabeth II.

## Royal concerns

It is generally recognised that a tension between tradition and modernity is a key theme of *The Queen*. Sandy Flitterman- Lewis reports director Stephen Frears saying, “[...] the film tells a symbolic story, because it says a lot about my country, which is divided between tradition and modernity” (2). This tension is beautifully realised in an early scene that depicts Blair's ineptitude with traditional protocols

during his first audience with the Queen. The inexperienced Blair is awkward, out of place, whilst the Queen's amusement establishes the maturity of age and an associated expertise and in these affairs – “you are,” she reminds him, “my tenth Prime Minister”. But, as signalled by Cherie Blair's (Helen McCrory) subsequent comment, “She's a little old lady living in the land that time forgot”, experience and tradition rapidly elides with age and obsolescence: a slide that brings into play the binary opposition between age and youth. This is rapidly developed when the scene cuts from the Blair's departure from the Palace to a montage sequence composed of archive TV news footage - Princess Diana during her controversial relationship with Dodi Fayed. The footage adds a further authenticating strategy to the narrative, whilst its evocation of paparazzi activity reminds and/or informs audiences of Diana's celebrity identity. The dynamic generated in the contrast between the stagnated protocols of the palace and the mobile frenzy surrounding Diana economically encapsulates a tension between tradition and modernity that is powerfully embodied by the ageing Queen and the youthful Princess.

A similar contrast, forged between the hidebound public relations machine of the palace and the media savvy spin doctors of Blair's PR team (The Modern Men of the DVD chapter title), establishes youthful modernity as a the dominant half of the binary. This chimes with dominant public opinion at the time of Diana's death - that Queen Elizabeth II was out of touch, that the monarchy was outdated and that the loss of Diana, through divorce and then death, was also a lost opportunity for its reform. Indeed, the film is at pains to give quantitative evidence of the monarchy's loss of popular acclaim. Registering a quiet dread at being the bearer of the republican mood sweeping the nation, Tony Blair informs the Queen that, “[...] a poll that's to be published in tomorrow's paper suggests that seventy per cent of people believe your actions to have damaged the monarchy and one in four are now in favour of abolishing the monarchy altogether”. However, during the course of the film, the breach between tradition and modernity is subtly shifted towards a fusion represented by the Queen's acceptance of public demands for reform.

The discursive framing of this shift is first registered as the Queen is roused from her sleep in the middle of the night to be given news of what proved to be Diana's fatal car crash. Wearing a heavy, fleecy pink dressing gown she clutches a hot water bottle to her chest in a poignant gesture of comfort that is suggestive of underlying fragility that could be read as either childlike or vulnerable old age.



Whilst subsequent scenes in which the Queen seeks advice and comfort from “Mummy” (Sylvia Syms) give some weight to the former reading, they do so in ways that resonate with dominant discourses of aging femininity as decline and vulnerability. It is noteworthy that at the time of Diana’s death, Queen Elizabeth II was already in her seventies, a fact that could hardly pass unnoticed in Britain since her seventieth birthday in 1996 had been formally marked by specially minted coins. By the time *The Queen* was released, she was in her eightieth year. Typically in western cultures, and regardless of actual bodily dispositions, the seventieth decade of life carries generalised assumptions about mental and physical decline - the onset of old age vulnerabilities. For Queen Elizabeth II however, the trappings of royalty have effectively positioned her as the exception to the rule, as if the institutional monarchy’s longevity is embodied and reproduced in an invulnerable physical constitution inherited from her long lived mother (she was 101 when she died 31 March 2002).

However, the trappings of royalty are here removed and the Queen is rendered an ordinary, ageing woman bearing the blow of unexpected bad news. This rendering is redolent with dominant ideas that ageing femininity and fragility are essential companions: ideas that render older women into the stereotypical “old ladies” evoked by Cherie Blair (above quotation). The film offers similar flashes of “old lady” fragility, for instance when ghillies and family repeatedly ask the Queen if she needs to be driven, and indeed when she has to be rescued from a river ford following damage incurred to the undercarriage of her Land Rover. This resonates with the construction of the aged Queen Mother as a marginal figure, the guardian of outdated protocols who is simply waiting for the death and funeral that will be briefly restore her to public visibility. The discourse of ageing vulnerability then becomes a template that overlays the remainder of the narrative: a template that resonates with the embedded dynamics between tradition and modernity, age and youth embodied by the Queen and Princess Diana.

One example of this dynamic is recognisable in the Balmoral section of the film - all dogs, Land Rovers and kilts. The Queen is walking along a wooded lane and the scene is suddenly transformed to a lyrical, aerial sequence of the Scottish highlands that, on first impression, adds little more than scenic wallpaper to the film. However, when this is abruptly interrupted by an equally sudden and startling jump to “talking head” archive footage of Diana’s interview with Martin Bashir interview for

*Panorama* first broadcast for the BBC in November 1995, it immediately accrues a narrative function. Even before the landscape disappears from the screen, we hear a disembodied male voice pose the question “Do you think you will ever be Queen”? Then, as an iconicised close up of Diana’s head replaces the scenery, we hear that immortalised reply - “No I don’t. (long pause, tilt of head, tortured half smile) I’d like to be a Queen of People’s Hearts”. The next image is of the Queen, watching a re-run of the interview, reclining on the bedcovers her head is propped on pillows and her legs and slippared feet are stretched before her. Stripped of all regal trappings, the entire pose establishes this as a moment of repose for an ordinary, ageing woman. With her grey hair and reading glasses, she could be any (white) body’s grandmother. And because she is wearing *that* pink dressing gown, the connotations of underlying fragility are inserted into a series of cuts made between the Queen and the Bashir interview. Thus, instead of the interplay between powerful and domineering majesty and abandoned wife which had previously haunted the public imagination, here we have an interplay between an ordinary, slightly fragile old lady and a potentially calculating, celebrity divorcee.

Of course, Frears’ direction is too subtle for this to become an over-determined reversal in that the Queen’s viewing of “the Queen of Hearts interview” is punctuated by a conversation with Prince Philip (James Cromwell) that keeps a dynastic dimension to the fore. The royal parents discuss their original approval of “the match” which they were both happy to “sign off” because she seemed a nice girl. The vocabulary and tone of the business world is in stark contrast to the romantic discourses reiterated in re-runs of the Charles and Diana “fairy tale wedding” of the TV footage – most notably when Prince Philip comments that he thought “he’d give the other one up” or “at least make sure his wife towed the line. Isn’t that what everyone does?” This effectively airs the idea that there is a different moral order shaping royal, dynastic marriage. Yet, a glancing eye flicker from a tight knuckled Queen gives an unsettling suggestion of restrained emotion concerning her own position both to, and within, that particular model of marriage. In this we are offered another suggestion of an ordinary, emotional fragility lying beneath the familiar, controlled public persona, a fragility deserving of our sympathy.

Momentarily, we also glimpse some common ground between the Queen and her errant daughter-in-law - the shared ground of masculine double standards. But crucially, this is never more than a flicker of allegiance because their relationship is

characterised by polarised attitudes to public appeal. The film's technique of cutting between archive footage of Diana with Dodi Fayed and the Queen at Balmoral secures a very fine distinction between Diana's pursuit of public attention and the Queen's conscientious attention to the public traditions and duties of office. These duties are formulated as cutting across every aspect of private and public life, and the Queen's sense of public duty is shown to be matched by a keen grandmotherly responsibility to her two grandsons that includes protecting them from the insatiable media attention of a celebrity culture which threatens to penetrate even the protected isolation of the Balmoral estate. Following news of Diana's death she orders that television sets are removed from the nursery and radios from the bedrooms of the two princes. And when she hears that her sister, Princess Margaret, had pronounced Diana to be "even more annoying dead than alive", the Queen's response, "Just make sure the boys never hear you talk like that," displays the concerned response expected from any "ordinary" grandmother.

Yet, this "ordinary" concern runs is woven through the demands of office – demands that initially shape her decisions about the response to Diana's accident, such as the propriety of Charles using the royal flight to fly to Paris to be at the side of a seriously injured Diana<sup>1</sup>, anxiety that a state funeral for the dead Diana would breach all established protocols and set precedents for privileges that could be granted to non-royal. Weaving through this is an overarching worry that the popular style of an individual, former royal celebrity should not transcend the British monarchy's long established traditions. Throughout, the Queen's restraint is juxtaposed to that of the Blair government's brash spin doctors who are aligned with Diana in their hungry and cynical courtship of international media coverage. Meanwhile, dialogue between Downing Street and the Palace articulates a schism in the understanding of modern governance that would seem irreparable if we did not already know the outcome.

Instead we are invited to witness Blair's apprenticeship in the diplomatic channels of royal engagement, his growing respect for the Queen and her dutiful contribution to the nation, as exemplified in dialogue that registers a growing fury at the disrespectful cynicism of Alistair Campbell,

You know, when you get it wrong you *really* get it wrong. That woman has given her whole life in service to her people – fifty years doing a job she *never* wanted – a job she watched kill her father. She's executed it with dignity,

honour and, as far as I can tell, without a single blemish – and now we line up paying for her blood – why? Because she’s struggling to lead the world in mourning for a woman who threw everything she offered back in her face, and who seemed, in the last few years, to be committed twenty-four-seven to destroy everything she holds dear.

In short, we are asked to witness Blair’s increasing unease with the vilification of the Queen, both as an individual person and as an arm of the state. Because the Queen is constructed as an ordinary older woman, the film positions us to sympathise with her dilemmas, with her problems and to adopt them as our own. The implications of the film is that tradition can act as a bulwark against the excesses of global media spin in the affairs of state; a bulwark that protects the State from the incursions of celebrity culture embodied by the youthful Diana. Consequently, when the Queen finally agrees to breach established protocols in order to accord royal funerary rites to Diana in line with public demands, her agreement becomes a gesture that synthesises tradition and modernity rather than being a divisive capitulation to the pressures of global media networks. Subtly, and inexorably, the film suggests that a fusion of age/youth, tradition/modernity is preferable to radical breaks that might expose the state to the corrosive effects of celebrities and celebrity culture.

### The monarchy, celebrity culture and stardom

Despite this critique of celebrity culture, the film is itself heavily reliant on its dynamics in its recuperation of the monarchy through the use of royal celebrity and the star persona of Helen Mirren. One of the “common sense” claims frequently made about Princess Diana is that she was the first royal “celebrity” in that she created her own public image and fostered and revelled in media attention. However, these claims do not stand up to close scrutiny. Even before the advent of contemporary mass media phenomena, available communication technologies such as proclamations, progresses and portraiture circulated and manipulated the spectacle of royal wealth and power, thereby producing iconic images of royals in a manner that prefigures the contemporary production of star and/or celebrity personas.

As Richard Dyer argues, stardom is a complex signifying system overlaid onto the identity of an actual person and is a product of mass media circuits in which everything that is said or written about a given public person produces a mediated persona that seems real, that seems connected to an actual historical person, but which is actually a tissue of discourses and images. Media circuits promise access to the real person through the panoply of mass media texts such as press articles, photographs, TV interviews and web sites, but the fulfilment of that promise is always incomplete, endlessly deferred to the next article, the next photograph or the next TV interview. In celebrity culture, the promise of the “real thing” is mobilised through a paradox that plays along an ordinary/extraordinary dichotomy. Dyer suggests that this paradox promises that stars are “ordinary”, just like you and me. Yet at the same time, stars are constituted as extraordinary - they have some special quality that sets them apart from you and me, some special quality that allows them to transcend the limitations of “ordinariness”. The ideological work of this paradox allows stars to be representative of “ordinary” people whilst allowing the social and economic capital and privileges that accrue to stars to be justified and legitimated by their specialness.

With the coming of mass media as we now recognise it, the spectacle of British royalty has been transformed from being a visible assertion of privilege and power, to being more closely aligned with the “ordinary/extraordinary” paradox of stardom. In part, this was negotiated through the emergence of the royal-biopic genre in the first decades of the twentieth century. Films from different decades such as *The Private Life of Henry VIII* (1932), *Victoria the Great* (1938) *Mrs Brown* (1997), for instance, purport to offer “behind the scenes” access to the monarchy and their private lives. Increasingly, these biopics domesticate the image of the monarchy – effectively suggesting that underneath the *extraordinary* prestige and protocols of royal birth the monarchy are quite *ordinary*, they are really, just like you and me. In Britain, this royal alignment with the ordinary/extraordinary paradox of stardom has been further facilitated by TV documentaries such as *Royal Family*, or most recently *Charles at 60: The Passionate Prince*, and by the appearance of royals on TV shows such as *It's a Knock Out* and by media events such as the BBC *Sports Person of the Year* award made to Princess Anne in 1971 following her success at the Olympic Games - an aspect of royal “ordinariness” now being re-iterated in the equestrian fame of her daughter, Zara Philips. All of this suggests that media celebrity and the

ordinary/extraordinary paradox of stardom is part and parcel of contemporary royal spectacle, rather than being a peculiar obsession of/with Princess Diana.

With Diana, of course, the visibility of royal spectacle was attenuated to an *extraordinary* degree compared to the *ordinary* paradigm of most royals and effectively, to borrow Jeffrey Richards term, she was “Hollywoodised”. For Richards, this Hollywoodisation is not simply an issue of unprecedented global media exposure, but is also produced through the narrative tropes of staple screen genres, such as soap operas, the fairytale romance and the cinema of monarchy that shape the mediation of her life and death. Richards also suggests that Diana’s image shares many attributes with that of Hollywood teen, rebel star James Dean, who is configured as “trying to find a place in the world, ... against a backdrop of vague and generalised discontent with the family, authority and the *status quo*” (Richards emphasis) (60). In the public imagination, Queen Elizabeth II came to represent and embody the status quo; those multiple sources of Diana’s discontent. In the unpredictable intertwinings of contemporary media circuits, public disapproval of Queen Elizabeth II’s treatment of her daughter-in-law rapidly translated to a wholesale dissatisfaction with the monarchy.

In very crude terms, the Elizabeth II/Diana relationship came to be organised around a modernity/tradition opposition that forged an intersection to formations of femininity and national identity. Diana’s fashion sense, physical tactility and emotional openness were established as the counterpoints to Elizabeth II’s fuddy-duddy style and repressed personality. In the same move, Diana was positioned as the breath of modern fresh air that would reinvigorate national identity by blowing away the cobwebs of centuries of pointless and obfuscating protocols represented by Elizabeth II. Cultural critics have long argued that tradition and modernity constitute a structuring tension in the production of twentieth century British national identity, and that femininity frequently operates as the site of negotiation between these apparently oppositional discourses. For instance, in *Forever England*, a convincing analysis of inter-war women’s writing, Alison Light coins the term “conservative modernity” when she suggests that British national identity is Janus-faced, simultaneously looking to both tradition and modernity. Light suggests that femininity is one site where the contradictions of “conservative modernity” are played out, and provisionally resolved. Elsewhere, building on Light, I suggest that Anna Neagle, Britain’s most popular screen star of all time, who is recognised as the quintessential

English lady, also embodies “conservative modernity”. Because of this, Neagle operated ideologically, and functioned to gloss two very distinctive ruptures in the discursive seam of national identity when the mobilisation of women into the Second World War, and the subsequent post-war entry into conspicuous consumption, had brought its stability into jeopardy.

In *The Queen*, Helen Mirren performs a very similar function, even though her star persona is much more complex than that of Neagle since it straddles the high/popular culture divide. Unusually, in a profession characterised by insecurity, Mirren has suffered few lengthy periods of unemployment, and with a high cultural reputation established at the prestigious Royal Shakespeare Company in roles such as Cleopatra, Mirren also crosses into popular culture via Michael Powell’s 1969 film, *The Age of Consent* and roles in classic television dramas such as *Prime Suspect*. However, other, more experimental films such as Peter Greenaway’s, *The Cook, The Thief, his Wife and Her Lover*, reinforce Mirren’s continuing reputation as a “serious” actress. As a product of the relaxation of stage censorship in the 1960s and broader sexual liberalisation, Mirren’s star persona is shaped by associations with on-stage sex and nudity, the represented debauchery of films such as *Caligola* and the widespread circulation of the title, “the sex queen of Stratford”. Because of the high cultural value that accrues from alignment with serious theatre, Mirren’s image is protected from the damaging reductions of popular sex appeal - she is sexy, not sleazy. In this way, Mirren’s persona forges links between the conservative values of traditional theatre and the modernity of 1960s sexual liberation.

This version of “conservative modernity” can be seen as an underlying principle informing those roles that famously brought global recognition – Jane Tennison in *Prime Suspect*, Queen Charlotte opposite Nigel Hawthorne in *The Madness of King George* the eponymous Elizabeth I, and of course, Chris Harper in *Calendar Girls*. On the one hand, Mirren’s existing “sexy but traditional” image brings a set of meanings to specific productions in addition to those embedded in the script. Simultaneously, in a circuit of mutual support, the dominant features of these famed characters adhere to Mirren’s persona. Thus, for instance, it is impossible to untangle Mirren’s star image from Jane Tennison’s tough, but vulnerable, integrity. Similarly, Mirren’s “sexy but traditional” star image resonates with the associated values of the institutional accolade, Dame of the British Empire, awarded to the star in 2003. Undoubtedly, the accolade infuses Mirren’s persona with the cultural capital of

ancient traditions, whilst at the same time, stars like Mirren insert a glamorous modernity into the accrued significations of these ceremonial awards.

Crucially, in recent years, Mirren's age (over 60) has become increasingly foregrounded, not as a symptom of incipient decrepitude, but rather in terms of Mirren's *exceptional* resistance to *ordinary* decline and decay. Her image is endlessly reproduced in glossy magazines such as *Vogue*, *Vanity Fair*, *People*, *Woman and Home* via front covers, feature articles and fashion shoots. In August 2007, the over 50s magazine, *Saga*, featured Mirren on both its front cover and in a centre page feature. Both cover and feature display Mirren in luxurious fashion that speaks of expensive, good taste, whilst the feature photograph is dominated by a double page spread of a reclining Mirren, her head propped on her arm, whilst the sinuous, silky fabrics of her clothing drape and delineate her body. The overall effect is to evoke the feminine figure of classical art in ways that resonate with highly sexualised "centre spread" connotations. Just one year later, global networks were saturated with paparazzi images of Mirren snapped during a beach holiday in Italy, and the headline of tabloid newspaper, *The Daily Mail*, "Helen Mirren the bikini queen reigns supreme at 63" typifies Mirren's constitution as a senior sex goddess, who has lost none of her youthful sexiness and remains a role model of feminine appeal.

In broad terms, this can be seen as an emerging mode of feminine regulation that inserts older women into the "Beauty Myth"<sup>2</sup>. More specifically, Mirren's senior sexiness represents a reconfiguration of her brand of conservative modernity that is crucial to the narrative strategies of *The Queen* in that the Queen, and by extension, Elizabeth II, is imbued with these cultural values. Thus, through Mirren's star image, Elizabeth II's royal spectacle takes on the mantle of both senior sexiness and contemporary, conservative modernity. As a consequence, the youth/age, modernity/tradition opposition between Diana and Elizabeth II is unsettled. Indeed, the Mirren/Queen dyad produced by the mingling of star and regal persona offers a preferred version of modernity compared to that of Diana, one that combines youth and age, sexiness and tradition, modernity and conservatism, rather than splitting them asunder. In the role of The Queen, Mirren's star persona therefore operates as an ideological suture to the ruptures in the national seam generated by Diana's royal celebrity.

Overall I am suggesting that in *The Queen* representations of aging femininity – Queen Elizabeth II, the Queen and Helen Mirren are woven together in a complex



web of mutual support that unsettles a series of oppositions between age/youth, tradition/modernity, monarchy/republicanism. In the process, aging femininity is established as a mode of conservative modernity that operates ideologically to promise a reformed monarchy embodied by the current incumbent. *The Queen* thus exemplifies, and contributes to the constitution of the monarchy as a resilient continuity in the formation of British nationalism.

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<sup>1</sup> The high moral ground implied in this scene takes on new dimensions since *The Daily Telegraph's* expose of MPs expenses has triggered national outrage in Britain.

<sup>2</sup> Naomi Wolf's argument that beauty practices deployed within western patriarchal cultures and which operate as a mechanism of capitalist, gendered power has lost none of its relevance in the intervening 18 years.

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