

Why *The Crown* is so fascinating to a world in perpetual crisis

## **As the series drifts, it mimics the drift of the monarchy itself—and of other institutions.**

by [Benjamin J. Dueholm](#) in the [January 27, 2021](#) issue



INSTITUTIONS ADRIFT: (clockwise from upper left) Prince Charles and Princess Diana (Josh O’Connor and Emma Corrin), Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip (Olivia Colman and Tobias Menzies), and Margaret Thatcher (Gillian Anderson) face an ever-changing world. (Netflix)

On a visit to London in February, I was approached by a documentary film crew interviewing people on the street about the royal family. Undeterred by my nationality and my ignorance about the current players and the details of the still-fresh “Megxit” drama, they asked whether I thought the monarchy ought to modernize and catch up to the times. Why would anyone want a modernized monarchy? I responded. American leaders are all caught up to the times, and it’s miserable.

I checked, and that comment didn’t make the final cut. One line from the interview remained: “I watch *The Crown* on Netflix.”

This show, the fourth season of which came out in November, has become a rather unlikely phenomenon. Created by Peter Morgan, who wrote the contemporary

historical dramas *The Queen* and *Frost/Nixon*, *The Crown* covers roughly the first four decades of Queen Elizabeth II's reign. It flits from major historical events to the minutiae of ritual and conduct to family drama to prolonged meditation on the changes in culture, duty, and the role of monarchy itself. It has apparently engaged a wide audience of royal watchers, costume drama fans, and history enthusiasts.

Having a more or less Jacobin disposition toward royalty, I was a little surprised to find myself so taken by the show—and more surprised to find myself echoing its traditionalist themes. For two seasons, *The Crown* dramatizes a running conflict between tradition and innovation as Elizabeth (Claire Foy) starts her family, ascends to the throne, and manages the heavily fraught symbolism of her role. The period is shadowed by the postwar dissolution of the empire and the prewar abdication of her uncle, once King Edward VIII, now David, Duke of Windsor (Alex Jennings). National, institutional, and familial crises of identity put Elizabeth in an escalating series of dilemmas that are less often resolved than managed or delayed. Elizabeth suppresses her individuality and instincts to carry out a symbolic function larger than herself. The former king, on the other hand, represents the innovative, self-asserting tendency within the family and the monarchy that both courts public fascination and risks loss of credibility.

Duty and precedent, however tedious, usually get the better of the argument in Morgan's story, even if the would-be innovators are occasionally pitied for being trapped in an institution that can't make any provision for their ordinary happiness. We are given no reason to admire David, scheming, ironic, and louche in his French exile. But watching his niece's coronation on television, he captures the alchemy of the event and the institution it adorns. Absurdity and profundity meld into a ritual David sees right through and yet can't bear to never have experienced. "Who wants transparency when you can have magic?" he retorts to a scoffing guest. "Pull away the veil and what are you left with? An ordinary young woman of modest ability and little imagination. But wrap her up like this, anoint her with oil, and hey, presto, what do you have? A goddess."

In the third season, Elizabeth (now played by Olivia Colman) has settled fully into her role, and the crackling conflicts of the early years mostly subside. It's a gloomier season, with a mining disaster, currency devaluation, and near coup against Labour prime minister Harold Wilson (a scene-stealing Jason Watkins) framing the Windsors' scattered interests and domestic dissatisfactions. The season's best episode is a story of disappointment. Prince Philip (Tobias Menzies), obsessed with meeting the

Apollo astronauts on their tour of the UK, gets his chance—only to discover that the men have nothing in particular to say about their experience, no insight gleaned from standing on the moon and looking back at Earth.

It is not hard to see an allegory for any pinnacle and the people who inhabit it. At season's end, the queen is marking her 1977 silver jubilee. The lyrics of poet laureate John Betjeman's jubilee hymn unroll in voice-over, a dignified procession forms, the crowds cheer, and Elizabeth observes the scene, anxious and uncertain. (I had formed a false memory of this moment and had to go back and watch it again to confirm: the last episode does not, in fact, end with the Sex Pistols' jubilee-year anthem "God Save the Queen.")

In its fourth season, *The Crown* exhibits worsening symptoms of strain and aimlessness. History intrudes in moments—the Troubles in Northern Ireland, the Falklands and Gulf Wars—but despite coinciding precisely with the tenure of Margaret Thatcher (Gillian Anderson), no real arc develops outside of the toxic and fundamentally uninteresting mismatch of Charles and Diana. There are fine moments, but they are tinged with camp. Looking over the newspapers the day after Diana's surprise dance performance to "Uptown Girl," the queen asks, "Who is Billy Jo-elle?" Watching Elizabeth breaking down the family gossip with her mother, sisters, and daughter over lunch, one is reminded of Tony Soprano and his associates breezily chattering and strategizing in the back room of the Bada Bing! club.

But hour after hour, it becomes clear that neither the show nor its characters have much left to say. The haphazardly tended story of Thatcher-era politics becomes mostly a matter of clashing personality and style rather than policy disagreement. A disturbed unemployed man who really did break into Buckingham Palace and talk to the queen in her bedroom becomes a mouthpiece for polished anti-Thatcher clichés.

As the season wore on, I started to wonder if the drift of the series was, intentionally or not, recapitulating the drift of the institution itself. The threat of the end of the monarchy looms over the whole series. All the palace's efforts to maintain ritual and manage public relations are, implicitly or explicitly, in service of the goal of prolonging a form of government no one can really explain or defend. In the middle of a fruitless attempt to broker a peaceful marriage for Charles and Diana, Elizabeth snaps at her son, "If one day you expect to be king, then might I suggest you start to behave like one." If you are immune, as I apparently am, to the peculiar pathos of

the Prince and Princess of Wales, you will find yourself agreeing vigorously with the monarch, if only so that the story could move on to something else. But there's really nowhere else for it to go.

And yet I confess that I devoured this latest sour and ungainly season as avidly as the first. Partly this is the work of Colman, a magnificent actor who only gets better as the script gives her character fewer chances to dazzle. (She is even depicted in the utter indignity of watching old newsreel footage of her youthful tour of Australia.) But mostly, I suspect, it was due to the ongoing spectacle of an old institution struggling for footing in a world that keeps changing under it.

Monarchy, the show is clear, is a great game of let's pretend. We may know on some level that nothing is sacred, and yet part of us wants to act as though all the pretense to sacredness is real. There's no particular reason to address certain descendants of the Saxe-Coburgs as "Your Majesty" and others as "Your Royal Highness." But perhaps we want to be expected to make these forms of address and the bows and curtsies to *someone*. Their job—their one job—is to act like we ought to do just that.

Thatcher, having bombed a meaningless test of etiquette during her visit to Balmoral Castle in Scotland, turns her failure around on her royal hosts in one of the more insightful moments of the whole series. "I am struggling to find any redeeming features in these people at all," the foremost Tory of the era says in disbelief. "They aren't sophisticated, or cultured, or elegant, or anything close to an ideal."

It may be that people need an object of reverence, with all the mild discretion and outright deception that reverence requires. But "object of reverence" is not an adequate job description for even the most exalted, adorned, and ancient of figureheads. One does need to be good at something. Watching them try and fail—or fail to try—has all the drama of watching someone fumble an opportunity no one else may seize.

Even so, the chamber drama of an island monarchy would probably not be so compelling if we were not in the midst of a broader crisis of legitimacy across all institutions and forms of government. The irony of the tension between the tendency to preserve tradition and the urge to "get with the times" is that the conservative functionaries are more likely than the royal innovators to grasp that the whole thing is a confidence game. And in this sense, monarchy is only an

exaggerated version of, well, everything else. Our own rituals and symbols of civic piety are in tatters. Something as simple as a loser conceding a presidential election, on the surface a decorous formality, turns out to be a significant aspect of our constitutional process and thus a point of no-holds-barred contention. National icons can be removed, in many cases quite justly, with no candidate to replace them. The flag itself, once sacrosanct at least to some, has been significantly displaced by a “thin blue line” variation.

“The old is dying and the new cannot be born,” the Italian writer Antonio Gramsci famously observed, and “in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.” In my own meek and unobtrusive way, I, like thousands of other clergy, put on the old garments, speak the old words, and preserve the old forms. For me, at least, this is partly out of hope in their truth and partly out of fear for a world that can, in fact, fully dispense with them. A constitutional monarchy and its built-in modern crises attract our attention, gentle or scornful, because it is so obviously a historical luxury. But the people who stand in large pulpits or in cardinal’s capes or behind presidential podiums have done no better preserving the aura of magic that any system of deference and mutual courtesy requires.

It is out of these comprehensive disappointments that truly reactionary politics is born. With Britain mired in Brexit negotiations and pandemic, climate, and migration crises all putting Western governments under severe and enduring strain, it is almost imaginable that the juggling and damage control depicted in *The Crown* is part of a very long game. When our other leaders have failed and every structure of public reverence has been pounded to dust, might we ask our crowned heads back as more than figureheads?

That, at least, is the reverie of every regime that believes itself to be perennial and temporarily disempowered when it is in fact permanently obsolete. The show has been accused by royal watchers and confidants of having exaggerated and fabricated the cruelty and vanity of the royal family. To the extent that this accusation is true—and the show is, despite its anchoring events, almost wholly fiction—it is, as a onetime servant of the French Bourbons put it, worse than a crime, it is a mistake. The royals don’t need to be horrid or even unsympathetic to be fascinating at this last, lonely outpost on the frontier of their era. “First the barons came for us, then the merchants, now the journalists,” the queen mother laments to Elizabeth as they endure a formal reception for bus drivers and bank clerks at the urging of a lord who wants them to get with the times. “Small wonder we make such

a fuss about curtsies, protocol, and precedent. It's all we have left. The last scraps of armor as we go from ruling to reigning to . . . being nothing at all."

Whether we see this as a tragedy or as the royals' just deserts makes no difference. They are no more at the mercy of whatever is coming next than we are.

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