

# THE QUEEN

Directed by Stephen Frears  
Produced by Andy Harries, Christine Langan, and Tracey Seaward  
Distributed by Miramax Films  
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How ironic that the Monarch's greatest challenge was also her greatest asset. Diana, Princess of Wales was a global superstar, easily the most popular Royal in history. Her death spared the Windsors further p.r. battles with the estranged princess, but their conspicuously reserved response to her demise (nicely detailed in *The Queen*) exposed the problem: Diana's popularity had buoyed the staid monarchy, and with her gone the monarchy was no longer indulged—it was reviled.

Charles and Diana's 1981 wedding, embraced by millions, was a performance designed by the Royals (particularly the aging Queen Mother) to boost the Windsors in popularity. St. Paul's Cathedral was chosen over the traditional Westminster Abbey because St. Paul's provided better camera-placement options. Commemorative merchandise, both authorized and illegal, flooded Britain.

Yet even on the eve of their wedding Charles and Diana had reservations, Charles unable, on camera, to admit he loved his fiancée, and Diana, aware of the looming Camilla Parker-Bowles, already binging and purging. But they went through with it. Why?

Certainly the momentum of the grand celebration was of juggernaut proportions. But while Diana, at the time, loved Charles, she was already aware that only an attachment with royalty could bring her the platform she secretly desired to fulfill her vague designs of transcendent do-goodery. She knew she was meant for more.

The world was caught up in the wedding, but like weddings everywhere comparatively little thought was given to the marriage. A wedding is just the first day of a lifetime together. Let us not forget the litany of failed royal unions: Princess Margaret (1960)—divorced; Princess Anne (1973)—divorced; Prince Andrew (1986)—divorced. If the Royals are only interested in marriage so legitimate heirs can be sired so the monarchy can continue; if the Royals insist on putting on a good show so the people accept Royal wealth, privilege, and nauseating noblesse oblige; if the Royals are a conservative influence to encourage tradition and heritage, but they're flexible enough to "change with the times" then what's the point? Are charity balls and ex-colonial walkabouts enough to justify their superior affectations?

If perhaps, as Tony Blair says in *The Queen*, Elizabeth II never wanted this, such reserve and humility and sacrifice are to be commended. But to what end? The Monarch is to play a limited role in the formation of policy. The prime minister seeks the Monarch's advice in private and the queen is expected to assent to whatever legislation passes the Houses of Commons and Lords. For all practical purposes, she can no longer dissolve a parliament or appoint a prime minister, as earlier in her reign.

The queen is a unifying presence for a populace perpetually betraying its lassitude. Britons seem resigned to their looming decrepitude, inured to their pensions and meager health service privileges. Barely good is good enough, apparently.

But the queen's habitual reticence on matters of policy is a disappointment in that she can take action that may only be possible by a monarch; she can broach difficult topics to her people. For example, in her Royal Christmas Message she could ruminate on the danger Islam poses to British society, its ultimate incompatibility with their current way of life.

The monarchy does no good if it merely provides entertainment. Towards the end of her life, Diana tried to concentrate her charity efforts in a stripped-down aesthetic that combined her preference for hands-on care for the dispossessed with a patina of celebrity concomitant with her station. Her crusade to ban landmines garnered world-wide attention in the summer of 1997. But at the same time, she was cavorting with capricious playboy Dodi Fayed. As quoted in biographer Andrew Morton's Diana: Her True Story, one friend observed: "Her head tells her that she would like to be the ambassador to the world, her heart tells her that she would like to be wooed by an adoring billionaire."

The 2011 nuptials between commoner Kate Middleton and Prince William are commendable for uniting two people who seem to have a genuine high regard for each other. But now the wedding-as-entertainment construct is even more obvious. Here there was no concern for virginity; the prince and Middleton had been living together for years! Old expectations by the Church that the Royals were to set a public example of propriety are completely discarded. Fears of another divorce trump all else. Divorce is unpopular, too...common.

People do not have to be in love to be married. One would assume that it helps, but it is so typical now that it might be good to see the alternative, for plenty of people in love divorce anyway. Charles didn't love Diana, but he later regretted how he'd handled the marriage. Of course he would—many called for him to be denied the throne in favor of his son.

Part of the affection for Diana is pure sympathy. Everyone thrilled to her wedding—it was a storybook dream every woman remembers harboring as a little girl. But we all grow up, and fantasies die, and Diana represented a beacon of strength to millions of women destroyed by the men they'd given everything to.

Diana's parents' divorce was an open wound from childhood. She'd never really dated anyone and didn't know how to judge Charles before it was too late. She merely thought him a very sad, thoughtful man, and she wanted to take care of him. The Windsors didn't realize that Diana's forbears had a history of mental illness. She continued to lose weight after the wedding, destroyed rooms in fits of rage, cut her body and once threw herself, while pregnant with William, down a flight of stairs.

She had her astrologists, séances, and premonitions. He had his gardening, polo, and philosophers. They were both eccentrics, but not in compatible ways.

Charles had never earned money cooking and cleaning like his wife had in the year before her marriage. All his life he'd been served and allowed to indulge every public pastime and secret vice. If he had cared for and protected Diana she would have blossomed. But

Charles never encouraged Diana in her newfound royal duties. He rarely spent time with her. He'd never had to deal with difficult people, and Diana was difficult.

For her part, Diana could have been self-sacrificial, which may have stricken Charles with guilt and compelled him to change. Instead, she made a bad situation worse. She didn't inspire him; she bludgeoned him.

And so he refused to jettison Camilla Parker-Bowles, a scourge and ruthless interloper. A cycle of mutual recrimination set in which resulted in both parties committing adultery and acting like the whole enterprise was doomed from the start.

But it's never too late. *The Queen* concerns a very important woman who has the wherewithal to admit that she is not always right. She realizes that her nation needs her to mourn. She's not caving to popular convention—she is realizing, albeit too late, what a gift Diana was to her subjects. The queen is constrained so much by her constitutional prerogatives that it's unfair to judge her too harshly. Though her legendary imperturbable calm can be unnerving in our modern-day milieu of histrionics and grievance-mongering, Elizabeth is just doing her duty. She could have abdicated when the Diana crisis brought the nation to a stop. The queen had the courage to stay.

And she never divorced Prince Phillip, who was, by reliable accounts, an adulterous cad. Elizabeth buried her pain and marched on.

We all have a role to play on this earth, and maybe she is, too, fulfilling a role, managing as best she can. Indeed, the Royals are a mess, but our own failures don't make front-page news. While there is undoubtedly much that the Royals can learn from us, there's also much we can learn from them.