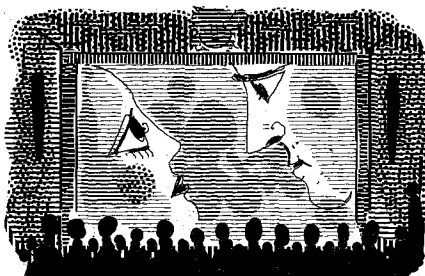


SHADOW PLAY

by Martha Bayles



Reel Queens

WITHOUT DOUBT, THE MEDIA EVENT of summer 1997 was the death of Lady Diana Spencer, the Princess of Wales. Newly divorced from Prince Charles, Diana was living the do-good, act-bad celebrity life when the limousine of her latest squeeze, Dodi Fayed (the son of the Egyptian-Swiss billionaire, Mohamed Abdel Fayed), crashed in a Paris tunnel while fleeing a pack of motorcycle-mounted paparazzi. Since Diana had appeared on the BBC complaining about how badly the royals had treated her, Queen Elizabeth II was disinclined to make a fuss. Holed up in Balmoral, their retreat in the highlands of Scotland, her majesty and the immediate family did their best to maintain an iron reserve.

As dramatized in the new film *The Queen*, that royal reserve turns out to be an immovable object meeting an irresistible force—a flood of public grief unleashed by Diana's death. Captured on screen by television news footage of swelling crowds and mounting heaps of flowers outside Buckingham Palace, this surge of emotion surprises and discomfits the queen (Helen Mirren). So when the newly elected prime minister, Tony Blair (Michael Sheen), urges her to make a series of gestures aimed at dampening public resentment at her perceived cold-hearted indifference, she resists, then eventually comes around. It's a fascinating tale, full of political resonance, and *The Queen*, written by Peter Morgan and directed by Stephen Frears, tells it superbly.

But kindly ignore the reviews. This is not a film about "a frumpy, emotionally stunted monarch," a "stubborn, blinkered, coddled woman, who can't even grieve like a human being," who reacts to the untimely death of "a pretty, vulnerable young woman" by "clinging obliviously to bygone codes of class and civility." Despite his limitations, the queen's husband, Prince Philip (James Cromwell), is not portrayed (in the words of still other reviews) as a "dim bulb," "whose exclamations are unfailingly snobbish and dull," any more than the Queen Mother

(Sylvia Syms) is depicted as "tipsy," "half-dead," and dispensing advice that "pertains to another era and is of no use." Most of all, the royal family are not shown "cloistered at Balmoral, knitting and nattering in their plain wool sweaters, caring more for their pets than for their children"—so "clueless" about "the cultural shift" in their own country that it takes Blair, a young Labor pol full of "fire and grace," "incorrigibly cheerful and gently manipulative," to "slap the royals awake" and "practically [order] them to get back to London."

After rattling on in this vein for a while, most of the reviewers then dropped the whole shtick and praised the film for somehow tricking them into sympathizing with the queen. Most chalked this up to Mirren's performance (which is extraordinary; the actress, always worth watching, is on a roll lately, winning an Emmy earlier this year for a stunning performance as the first Queen Elizabeth in the HBO series, *Elizabeth I*). But one or two reviewers came close to conceding that maybe, just maybe, the queen had a point. For example, Roger Ebert wrote that "the queen is correct, indeed, by tradition and history in all she says about the affair—but she is sadly aloof from the national mood. Well, maybe queens should be." And David Edelstein of *New York* magazine halted his gleeful royal-bashing to lament "the passing of a more dignified, more orderly world."

The prize for most idiotic review goes to Manohla Dargis of the *New York Times*, who described *The Queen* as "a sublimely nimble evisceration of that cult of celebrity known as the British royal family." The film is exactly the opposite: a subtle and intelligent exploration of the difference between royalty and celebrity. The contest between monarch and prime minister is fascinating precisely because they are both fully aware of the difference. What they disagree on is how best to split it. Just because the queen is surprised by the size of the media circus surrounding Diana's death, that doesn't mean it

is "bewildering" to her, or represents "a shift in values she does not understand." After all, this is the monarch who brought Great Britain into the media age, circling the globe to foster a positive post-colonial image; wearing pastel coats and flowered hats so people (and cameras) could pick her out of large crowds; and pioneering televised appearances such as the annual Christmas address and the "royal walk-around." How could she not have been aware of the superheated celebrity culture of the 1980s and '90s, when several members of her own family (not just Charles and Diana) were its favorite fodder?

Media Scrutiny

THROUGHOUT HER LONG REIGN, ELIZABETH II has refused to be interviewed on camera. But this may be media savvy, not naïveté. Billions would tune in to see her share memories of being doted on by her grandparents, Queen Mary and King George V; of studying modern languages with private tutors; of driving a truck for the Women's Auxiliary Territorial Service during World War II. *Your Majesty, what was it like to grow up third in the line of succession and then, at age 26, be crowned queen of half the world?* But as the queen doubtless suspects, the millions who cried their eyes out over Diana would demand more. For them, nothing would do but a ten-hanky confession, to Barbara Walters if possible, of Elizabeth's deepest feelings about everything from her upbringing by starchy remote parents to her relations (erotic? Oedipal?) with ten prime ministers from Winston to Tony. *Your Majesty, have you ever felt envious of Diana's fantastic wardrobe and thrilling sex life?*

Unthinkable, of course. Most people, even some Di-worshippers, would object to seeing the soiled knickers of this public figure laundered for the entertainment of the great unlaunched. The interesting question is why. It's not strictly a function of power. The most powerful office

on earth, the American presidency, is hardly exempt from pressure to get up close and personal. (Who can forget that 1997 was also the year that Bill Clinton "did not have sexual relations with that woman"?) At the same time, exemption from the smarmier modes of media scrutiny is not given to powerless people, should they be so unlucky (or lucky) to be thrust into its glare. No, the exemption has to do with the nature and origin of one's power. Despite the legacy of English journalist Walter Bagehot, who argued in the 19th century that the British monarchy was just a "bauble" used to pacify the masses, the present queen holds significant power. Some of it belongs to her alone, the product of a half-century's dignified and engaged presence. And some of it is rooted in soil more ancient than any being traded on today's media market.

Film critics should understand this, because their line of work is one of the few that requires occasional reflection on political regimes other than liberal democracy. The typical movie monarch may be a lion, grasshopper, human, monster, or high-IQ insectoid from outer space; it hardly matters, because the plots are invariably driven by the ancient political question of what makes a ruler good or evil, just or unjust. And

of course, there are plenty of small-r republican movies, in which bands of aristocrats, wielding light-swords or briefcases, battle to topple evil tyrants and establish new orders ruled by themselves, the best and brightest. But regrettably, today's critics tend to see every political actor as either an evil fascist Republican or a good progressive Democrat.

Dignity

THAT'S WHY THE REVIEWS MISINTERPRETED the stag. The climactic scene in *The Queen* occurs in the high country near Balmoral, where the queen is alone, driving her vintage Land Rover in search of Philip, who is out hunting a magnificent and elusive 14-point stag. Here the queen is depicted as the embodiment of the British virtues of toughness, self-reliance, preference for rugged nature over coddled luxury, and faith that the wisest counsel is conscience, heard in solitude. But as it happens, she drives too fast into a mountain stream and damages a wheel. She has a cell phone and calls for assistance, but that doesn't alter the significance of the moment, which is that even her majesty cannot always go it alone.

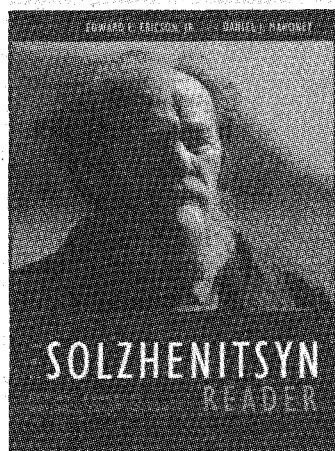
Meditating on this lesson, she climbs onto a rock overlooking the stream, and removing her scarf so the wind can ruffle her hair, settles down to wait. At first she is cool and collected, gazing appreciatively at a landscape she obviously loves. But then she starts to weep.

Wisely, Frears films the weeping queen from the back, so that rather than gape at her red face and runny nose (a movie staple these days), we see only the back of her head and heaving shoulders. Then enters the stag, picking his way across the hillside until the queen sees him and exclaims, "O Beauty!" (You'd better believe there's no "h" after that "O.") A moment later, hearing gunfire and voices, she tells the animal "Shoo!" And watching him retreat without yielding one jot of his dignity, she breaks into a smile. The queen is resolved. Assuming her customary expression of stern benevolence, she proceeds to comply with the prime minister's suggestions. But clearly she has been moved less by the talkative pol than by the noble beast.

The word *noble* is crucial. While preparing to leave for London, the queen learns that the stag has been shot, not by the royal hunting party but by a guest at "one of the commercial estates." Upon her departure she stops at the estate in question and asks to see the "imperial 14-pointer," which is hanging beheaded in a game shed. From the gamekeeper she learns that the stag was wounded "by an investment banker" and had run 14 miles before the gamekeeper could "finish him off." "Let's hope he didn't suffer too much," remarks the queen. Then with her characteristic dry irony, she adds, "Please pass my congratulations to your guest."

None of this makes any sense if the stag is interpreted as "a mawkish stand-in for the doomed Diana" or "the movie's simplistic reminder to Elizabeth that Diana, too, is dead and deserving of some compassion" (to quote two metaphorically challenged reviewers). Just as roses symbolize love, stags symbolize nobility. If you want to get mythological about it, Diana is the name of the Roman goddess of the hunt, the one who slays the stag. The queen's epiphany is not about her pathetic former daughter-in-law, it's about herself. And not the private self who wants to hide under the covers whenever Tony Blair rings, but the public self who has been raised from birth to be the living residue of an ancient ideal: rule by a person or persons superior in virtue. Watching the stag beat his dignified retreat, the queen realizes she can do the same. And shortly thereafter, we see Blair lose his temper with his wife Cherie and his press secretary, Alastair Campbell, who have been dissing the queen. Whether or not the real Blair is given to eloquent outbursts defending the importance of the Crown to the British system of government, this one certainly comes at the right dramatic moment.

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What, exactly, does Blair want the queen to do? First, fly a flag at half-mast over Buckingham Palace: a highly inappropriate gesture, since that flag is not the Union Jack but the Queen's own standard, raised only when she is in residence and never lowered for anyone's death, not even that of a king. Second, go to London and pay her respects to Diana, preferably on the telly—the last thing the queen wants to do after reading mawkish tabloid headlines like "Show Us You Care." And third, authorize a state funeral: an idea so unprecedented, the queen's staff are forced to adapt the plans for the Queen Mum's funeral, with charity socialites standing in for soldiers and pop stars for foreign heads of state.

To object to such changes may seem silly to us Yanks, steeped as we are in the notion that improvised ceremonies are better than traditional ones. Take funerals, for example. There is a whole sub-genre of American indie film, in which estranged family members come together to carry out the last wishes of old Uncle Natural, usually something along the lines of having his ashes baked with hashish into Alice B. Toklas brownies and fed to the albino elk that in a remote part of Yosemite had watched him lose his virginity to a hippie girl now obese and living in a trailer with 17 cats. (This is a generic plot, available free of charge to anyone at Sundance.) But even we Yanks respect tradition...sometimes. Ask yourself: Should graduating seniors wear thongs and pig noses instead of caps and gowns? Should the White House be painted chartreuse? Should the Academy Awards be held in an underground parking garage and pod-cast to your cell phone, instead of beamed in HD-TV to your new plasma screen? Multiply these reactions by a googolplex, and you'll grasp what tradition means to many Britons.

An intriguing illustration comes from the life of Dame Mirren herself. Christened Ilyena Vasilievna Mironov, she is the daughter of an Englishwoman and a Russian, Vasily Mironov, whose father, Pyotr Mironov, came to London during the First World War as an envoy from the court of Tsar Nicholas II. The grandson of an aristocrat, Count Andrei Kamensky, Pyotr could not go home after the Bolshevik Revolution. So he stayed in London, driving a taxi, until his death in 1957. In 1955 his son Vasily changed the family name to Mirren and anglicized their first names. According to the *Daily Mail*, Helen Mirren has been keen to track down her Russian origins, not least because, as the reporter comments, "the actress, currently winning plaudits for her role as Elizabeth II in the acclaimed film *The Queen*, is herself descended from nobility. Her family tree can be traced back to a famous Russian soldier, ennobled by Tsar Paul I in the 18th Century."

Celebrity and Royalty

FOR GOOD HISTORICAL REASONS, AMERICANS have trouble comprehending this preoccupation with nobility—an incomprehension well reflected in *Marie Antoinette*, Sofia Coppola's over-the-top tribute to the Last Days of Disco—I mean, Versailles. Filmed on location and starring Kirsten Dunst as the Habsburg princess who at the age of 14 was wrenched from her home in Vienna and married to the French *dauphin*, this film stuffs the screen with obscenely extravagant visions of Louis XV's obscenely extravagant court. Much has been made of the 1980s rock soundtrack, which jells better with some scenes than with others. But the real anachronism is the acting, from Rip Torn playing Louis XV in a manner that would suit Uncle Natural, to Jason Schwartzman turning the future king, Louis-Auguste, into a befuddled high school nerd who does not know what to do when a pretty blonde lands in his bed.

Above all, Dunst transforms Marie Antoinette into a Hollywood stock character: the lower-class beauty with a brain, who is suddenly swept into the orbit of people richer and more powerful, but not necessarily sharper, than she. From Judy Holliday in *Born Yesterday* to Anne Hathaway in *The Devil Wears Prada*, this smart cookie typically starts out resenting those who did not come up the hard way, then ends up pitying them and teaching them the Golden Rule. To be born Archduchess of Austria is not exactly coming up the hard way, but never mind. When we first meet Maria Antonia Josefa Johanna von Habsburg-Lothringen, she is living in an okay palace (nothing special), playing with her pug dog, and wearing her hair loose. It's only when she crosses into France that she is forced to submit to all that heavy-duty royal razzmatazz, and her reactions are every bit as irreverent and entertaining as Judy Holliday's would have been.

I have yet to read a satisfactory explanation of why *Marie Antoinette* was booed at Cannes, but here's one possible explanation of why they found it mind-bendingly wrong: say what you will about the French, they do know the difference between celebrity and royalty. Even when chopping off their monarch's head, the French have always grasped what the institution stood for. And as for aristocracy, no amount of decapitation has ever made a dent in its salience in French politics, culture, and life. *La République* is still governed by the best and the brightest, *soi-disant*.

Barnard professor Caroline Weber, author of *Queen of Fashion: What Marie Antoinette Wore to the Revolution* (2006), defended Coppola's liberties in the *New York Times*, asserting that Marie is "multifaceted enough to accommo-

date most any interpretation, any ideology, any cultural bias." So chill, *citoyens*: this ungainly film is not a distortion of French history, it's a deliberately unflattering self-portrait of the Americans. Weber concludes: "With no interest in thorny policy issues, no care for the consequences of her actions, and no doubts about her own entitlement, this Marie Antoinette is today's ugly American par excellence: a Bush Yankee in King Louis's court."

That should get them clapping again. But unfortunately, when Coppola's film is viewed in this light, it comes off as even less successful, because it is not anachronistic enough. No doubt this is because Coppola's heavy reliance on Antonia Fraser's fine biography, *Marie Antoinette: The Journey* (2001), introduced a discordant note of historical accuracy. This shows up most clearly in the subplot involving Louis XV's mistress, Madame du Barry. A commoner and former courtesan, du Barry's sole reason for being at court was to service the randy old king. And this did not sit well with Marie Antoinette—indeed, the historical evidence indicates quite clearly that she snubbed the low-born du Barry, who took it quite ill and promptly became her enemy. Needless to say, such snobbery hardly fits with Coppola's portrayal of Marie Antoinette as a perky egalitarian whose heart goes out to the class nerd (Louis-Auguste). The only way this character could possibly react to the class skank (du Barry) would be to make friends with her and then join her in plotting revenge against all those bullying, stuck-up courtiers.

Marie Antoinette fails both as history and as anachronism. It clumsily distorts its subject, not just by keeping the starving masses offstage (as many have complained), but also by saddling its heroine with a slew of democratic, nay, populist virtues that are singularly ill suited to her particular time, place, and fate. Excoriated for 140 years after her execution as a symbol of aristocratic selfishness, Marie Antoinette was rehabilitated in 1933, when the Austrian-Jewish writer Stefan Zweig wrote a biography highlighting the young queen's courage and grace under the pressure of capture, imprisonment, and the guillotine. If you can't find Zweig's book, rent the 1938 movie starring Norma Shearer, which is based on it. Of course, that MGM production, lavish at \$2 million, can't compare with the gorgeous eye candy Coppola bought for herself at \$40 million. But in its creaky way, the older film tells a better story. Too bad the next version of Marie Antoinette's life cannot be a truly definitive portrait, written by Peter Morgan, directed by Stephen Frears, and starring the young, dewy, and suitably aristocratic Ilyena Mirinov.

Martha Bayles, who teaches humanities at Boston College, is the CRB's columnist on television and film.

PARTHIAN SHOT

by Mark Helprin



The Literary Tenor of the Times

UNABLE AS USUAL TO RESIST THE ABSURD, THE NEW YORK *Times* recently attempted to find and certify the best work of American fiction that appeared in the last quarter-century, and perhaps to dilute their unconscious embarrassment published a list of the runners-up. Asked to serve on the enormous panel of solons they had assembled for the purpose, I declined on the grounds that neither I nor just about anyone else has a sufficiently wide or deep knowledge of all that has been written in the period, and that even if we had, such a determination is impossible, especially at the hands of literary people who have intellectual debtors and creditors, protégés, and favorites (including, not least, themselves).

But suppose for a moment that reality is suspended and the perfectly disinterested judges, after considering various worthies, were left to decide which of Homer, Dante, and Shakespeare would fill the last slot in their list. Though they might make the choice, it would be meaningless. A meaningless decision, however, would be easy in the literary tenor of these times, which makes itself known not so much in works of fiction but in the vast apparatus that contains and to an alarming extent directs them.

One would have to have spent the last 40 years in a bathyscaphe to be unaware of the conventions, requirements, strictures, and demands that aggressively have (almost) monopolized the field. To anyone who reads, writes, or publishes, they are inescapable, the senseless, destructive, and cruel companions to a suicidal slide of culture, remarkable for the degree to which they are taken as palliatives and correctives rather than the acid that eats away the bone. After all, the addict views narcotics, the criminal his next score, and the lemming the open air beyond the cliff edge—as salvation.

And thus the literary tenor of the times is saturated above all with nihilism and its outrider, contempt; followed by politicization and its outrider, conformity. The first pair of abominations serves to dissolve the supple, living flesh of civilization—whether in blunt Leninist political combat hidden in the folds of academic relativism, or in the unbri-dled Satanic ravings of popular culture that society has lost the courage to dismiss outright. And the second pair of abominations serves to cast what remains after the dissolution into a slipshod orthodoxy as gray, hard, and dead as concrete.

Strangely enough, the enforcers and beneficiaries of this orthodoxy, which in spirit goes far beyond even the standard obeisances to race, sex, class, economics, and selected dogma in international relations and meteorology, think they are beleaguered revolutionaries. For example, in affirming his courage, Norman Mailer—everything he has done has been to affirm his courage, which perhaps one should not condemn in a man who bears such a strong physical resemblance to Mamie Eisenhower—pronounces that he has been a leftist all his life, something that in Manhattan and Brooklyn Heights may not be quite as dangerous as he hallucinates.

And yet politics themselves, of whatever coloration, are less damaging an intrusion upon the literary enterprise than the now deeply engraved notion that literature cannot escape them. Political discourse can be literature, as Pericles, Lincoln, and Churchill prove, but literature that is political discourse destroys itself, as history proves (pace the febrile tracts of tenured lunatics: *Disguised Vaginal Narratives of the French & Indian War: The Hidden Meanings of Bernard de Con's Account of the Assault on Fort Ticonderoga—A Novel*). Whereas great political writing, always primarily literary, is equipped to transcend the causes and contentions of the day, a literary work that rests upon a political cause will follow it into oblivion. Lincoln and Churchill infused politics with the higher truths to which literature is the handmaiden, but the modern convention excludes these truths by subordinating literature to politics.

ONE SELDOM ENCOUNTERS PURE NIHILISM, FOR JUST AS anarchists are usually very well-organized, most of what passes for nihilism is a compromise with advocacy. Present literary forms may spurn the individual, emotion, beauty, sacrifice, love, and truth, but they energetically embrace the collective, coldness of feeling, ugliness, self-assertion, contempt, and disbelief. And why? Simply because the acolytes of modernism are terribly and justly afraid. They fear that if they do not display their cynicism they will be taken for fools. They fear that if they commit to and uphold something outside the puppet channels of orthodoxy they will be mocked, that if they are open they will be attacked, that if they appreciate that which is simple and good they will foolishly have overlooked its occult corruptions, that if they stand they will be struck down, that if they love they will lose, and that if they live they will die.

As surely they will. And others of their fears are legitimate as well, so they withdraw from engagement and risk into what they believe is the safety of cynicism and mockery. The sum of their engagement is to show that they are disengaged, and they have built an elaborate edifice, which now casts a shadow over every facet of civilization, for the purpose of representing their cowardice as wisdom. Mainly to protect themselves, they write coldly, cruelly, and as if nothing matters.

But life is short, and things do matter, often more than the human heart can bear. This is an elemental truth that neither temporarily victorious nihilism, nor fashion, nor cowardice can long suppress, which is why the literary tenor of the times cannot and will not last. And which is one reason among many why one must not accept its dictates or write according to its conventions. These must and will fall, for they are subject to constant pressure as generation after generation rises in unprompted affirmation of human nature. And though perhaps none living may see the change, it is an honor to predict and await it.