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The Perception of the New British Monarchy. Looking Back on Elizabeth II's Reign

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Abstract

According to public-opinion polls, the British monarchy enjoys great popularity in the present-day society. For many critics, it remains a mystery how this “archaic institution” has gained enduring support over the years (Clancy 2021). Other scholars have discussed Elizabeth II’s reign in detail, considering the institutional power and its evolution (Cannadine 2004; Pimlott 1998). Likewise, it is the aim of this essay to analyse Elizabeth II’s reign, specifically, the challenges she has encountered, and the strategies taken to overcome these obstacles. To that end, this essay presents the evolution of Elizabeth II’s public image considering the influence of her precedents and the Monarchy’s role during post-war Britain and the 1990s, an era of scandals. From an historical and semiotic approach, this essay argues that the popularity of the Windsors is based on the coexistence of traditional ceremonies that maintain the institution’s mystique with a process of “celebrization” and humanisation of the Monarchy. Drawing upon the media representation and the fictional narratives that construct Elizabeth’s iconicity, this paper suggests that her symbolic role has been readapted in relation to the evolution of the English imagined community and reshaped according to public sovereignty.

Keywords: Elizabeth II, symbolic power, imagined community, media representation, icon of affinity

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1. Introduction. The British Monarchy: from Absolute to Symbolic Power

In the contemporary world, monarchies have increasingly been defined as archaic, outmoded, and purposeless institutions. For this reason, many monarchies are struggling to survive, threatened by the expansion of republican ideas and the press criticism. The British monarchy is not an exception. Nonetheless, this institution has endeavoured to find a place in today's rapidly changing society. In other words, the monarch still has a pivotal role in the development and creation of the nation's identity. According to Smith, this national identity is "the continuous reproduction and reinterpretation of the pattern of myths, memories, symbols and values that compose the distinctive heritage of the nation, and the identification of its individuals with that pattern and heritage" (2006, 438). In this essay, the focus is placed on the common history and shared traditions that create a sense of community through the discursive construction of Queen Elizabeth II. That is what Maurice Halbwachs refers to as "collective memory" reinforced by Stuart Hall's "systems of cultural representations" that correlates with a set of shared values, traditions, and narratives (De Cillia, Reisigl and Wodak 1991, 154–55). In consonance with this idea, Benedict Anderson's notion of "imagined communities" justifies why nations are discursively constructed "[and] represented in the minds and memories of the nationalized subjects as sovereign and limited political units" (153). In other words, the complex network that identifies the monarch as a significant element between the individuals and the nation.

It seems appropriate, therefore, to explore the individual as an "icon" (see below) which embodies the national values and connects the nation to tradition and history. Ergo, the monarch, the individual, plays the role of "the national hero(ine)" (Prieto-Arranz 2006, 116). It is an undeniable fact that the construction of this "collective memory" in relation to the present-day monarch's iconicity has been influenced by who writes about the nation and how this history is written. Hence, "Whig historiography" is key to understanding the present image of the monarch. This notion is an interpretation of, in this case, British history as a representation of the progressive, democratic and protestant nation whose monarch is controlled by the parliament (Kumar 2000, 589). The importance of the "Whig interpretation of history" in Britain lies in the transmission and reproduction of an official historical discourse throughout centuries that has specifically influenced the English, their popular culture as well as the power of the monarchy. Significantly, Kumar encapsulates this idea of the "Whiggish" version of (English) history stating that "Britain and the British came to be identified with the Crown, with Parliament, with the Protestant religion, and with the worldwide British Empire" (589–90).

In this regard, some scholars have tended to present Elizabeth II's prominent symbolic and constitutional power as well as her popularity in historical and biographical terms (Cannadine 2004; Hames and Leonard 1998; Pimlott 1998). Yet others have contested, questioned, and resisted the Queen's privilege and symbolism, studying its evolution towards a "brand-like" and "corporate" power (Clancy 2021; Otnes and Maclaran 2015). So far, however, there has been little discussion about the elements that forge the image and popularity of Elizabeth II. How has the Queen maintained such an enduring support and fascination? Considering the Queen as an "icon", specifically, an "icon of affinity" (see below), her image has developed, adapted, and changed. The strategies that the monarchy uses to face the challenges analysed in this paper shed light on the British monarchy's popularity as a symbolically powerful institution. In this light, this constitutional monarchy has been reshaped thanks to the affinity constructed with its nation and its participation in the "cultural public sphere" (McGuigan 2000), that is, its representation in the media and in celebrity-consumer culture.

This paper aims at analysing the figure of Elizabeth II adopting an historical and semiotic approach. It is important to introduce some basic concepts in order to provide a proper semiotic interpretation of the representation of the figure of the monarch. Therefore, it must be considered the linguistic division established by Ferdinand de Saussure of what is perceived (i.e. the sign) into its *signifier* (i.e. the form it takes) and its *signified* (the concept the signifier represents), whose relation is arbitrary (Bally and Sechehaye 1959, 65–69). A further development to consider is Charles Sanders Peirce's "Theory of Signs" and the notion of "icon". In opposition to Saussure's arbitrariness, iconicity establishes a connection between the form, in this case, the monarch, and the meaning, the mental image. Accordingly, the term "icon" is fundamental in this analysis since it refers to "those other signs in which signifier and signified bear a close resemblance" (Prieto-Arranz 2006, 117). For this reason, this research will examine the Queen Elizabeth II and her family as "icons", and more specifically as "icons of affinity" considering the "image(s) [monarchy] sought to convey" (118), that is to say, the mediated nature between the monarchy and the importance of public sovereignty. At the same time, this iconicity is intrinsically related to the transition from absolute to symbolic power that Western monarchies underwent, triggered by the limitation of their powers. Importantly, it has been transformed from an almost autocratic form of government to a symbolic constitutional institution:

Ever since the English Civil War, which determined that the Monarch reigned subject to Parliament, the powers of the Monarchy have gradually been reduced. In each century, those powers have grown less, and this process of attrition has continued into modern times. [...] But for the general public, [Monarchy's] popularity will depend on its wider roles, in particular the welfare Monarchy, and its contribution to celebrity culture, which may prove a double-edged sword. (Hazell and Morris 2017, 6)

The British monarchy has undergone significant changes throughout history, and it carries out different roles: from the international, religious, political to welfare monarchy. If something is important in the retention of that power is the monarchy's evolution towards a new popular, celebrity narration. Their power is limited, and the *de facto* responsibilities are constantly being adapted to the "urban, secular and democratic [societies]" (Cannadine 2004, 294). That is why this essay will mainly focus on the welfare monarchy, considered to be the royal function closer to the people that will be examined through its iconography and iconicity. To the purpose of this discussion, this essay begins by presenting Elizabeth II's predecessors that traced the development of the figure of the monarch as a national icon. It will then go on to the focus of this study: Elizabeth II's challenges. This section is divided into two parts. Initially, Elizabeth's first years in the throne would be analysed considering the importance of the nation-monarchy bond after the Second World War and the pivotal role that television had in attempting to humanize the Monarchy. Finally, the representation of the figure of the Monarch during the 1990s and 2000s will be examined in relation to celebrity culture and Diana's popularity illustrated in the film *The Queen* (Stephen Frears, 2006).

2. The Precedents: the Monarch as a National Icon

The iconicity of the monarch has experienced drastic changes throughout history up to now. Nonetheless, this evolution not only is personal but also social, historical and political (Cannadine 2004, 311). In order to understand why Elizabeth II is presented as a source of English national identity, special attention must be paid to her precedents who shaped the figure of monarchs as national icons. For instance, Elizabeth I was the first monarch who consciously used the media to craft her iconicity as Gloriana and the Virgin Queen¹. Significantly, the currently-reigning Monarch's iconicity moves forwards into the future bearing the past in mind.

¹ This influence on the image of Elizabeth II would be explored in the section "Post-war Britain: Continuity and an Attempt to Humanise the Monarchy (1951–1969)".

Hence, this part of the analysis will start presenting Queen Victoria as one of the precursors of this “icon of affinity” associated to the monarch, moving to the 1936 constitutional crisis during the Edward VIII’s scandalous and short reign, and finally analysing the image of the monarchy under George VI, Elizabeth II’s father and predecessor.

Queen Victoria’s iconicity is associated with the imaginative identification with her people and the developing role of the media in constructing the monarchy’s symbolism. It was not until Queen Victoria (r. 1837–1901) that people started to identify themselves with the monarch and with the “[reinvented] imperial, ceremonial, welfare and family monarchy” (Cannadine 2004, 311) that embodied the exemplary and outstanding values of the nation. To put it another way, previous to that moment, there was a paucity of information about the British monarchy. Victoria, in connection to her established moral values (i.e. Victorian morality), transformed the monarch into a model for their subordinates. During the day of her coronation in 1838, she wrote about this sentiment in her private diary: “their good humour and excessive loyalty was beyond everything, and I really cannot say *how* proud I feel to be the Queen of such a *Nation*” (The Royal Family website, n.d.). Moreover, this new style of monarchy “firmly on the side of the People” (Punklett 2001, 13) was reinforced by the rise of the media and print culture. What is more, the media making of the monarchy and the idealised representation boosted the promotion of an accessible “invented tradition” (Cannadine 2012) considering that the rituals such as the coronation “became splendid, public and popular” (120). Similarly, her reputation as a matriarch and a representative of the imagined national community developed into “Queen-as-celebrity” popularity. It is worthy of note that, consequently, the *de facto* power of the Crown was reduced and replaced by an increasingly symbolic and soft power. According to Plunkett, the narrative and iconicity behind Queen Victoria involved “the loss of innocence concerning the authenticity of her populist figure” (2001, 16), conveying the immediacy of her symbolic power. Certainly, this perception of the monarch concerns the present reign and the figure of Elizabeth II. However, considering Elizabeth II as the reinvention of Queen Victoria may present misconceptions due to a mixture of iconicity, fictionality, authenticity and royal popularity.

Changing positive attitudes towards the whole institution were disrupted by the shortest-reigning monarch Edward VIII (January 1936–December 1936). At that moment in history, the Emperor-King opposed the government when he proposed to Wallis Simpson, an American divorcée. This event changed the situation in the United Kingdom and led to the constitutional crisis of 1936 triggered by the King’s abdication. The “invented tradition”, a term coined by Hobsbawm (Cannadine 2012), was in danger since the icon who presumably embodied the

national identity seemed to threaten the accepted traditions. Thenceforth, the monarch's personal life as well as his reputation were in the spotlight. At that moment, the British people expressed their "solidarity, on the one hand, or revulsion and disgust, on the other" (Mort 2014, 51) sending letters to the King himself. To put it another way, the continuity of the monarchy was, figuratively, under the control of the public opinion. Furthermore, the media portrayed him as a selfish person blindly in love "flirt[ing] with fascist politics" (33). As a result, King Edward VIII's iconicity was damaged, and he seemed not to deserve his authoritative position. Additionally, the affair and his ideology affected his reputation and this moment also turned into "a temporary interruption to the progressive evolution of the Windsor monarchy" (61). If monarchical powers were reduced over time, at that point, the symbolic power became a fundamental evidence of the impact the monarchy had on the country. Moreover, this symbolic power was a manifestation of the weakest faults affecting the image of the institution (Knappen 1938, 246). To that end, the controversial public performance implied, however, a rising interest in the human part of the royal family. The abdication brought to the forefront the media interest in the coverage and construction of stories around the Monarchy. As a result, Elizabeth II and her family will bear consequences of the media appetite for royal stories.

After Edward VIII's abdication and the alleged loss of status, the media image of the monarchy required a change. Therefore, George VI (r. 1936–1952) began the rebuilding of a ruined iconicity. Significantly, his reign coincided with the Second World War, and thus, the people and the monarchy joined forces to combat a common cause. Before that moment, the figure of the new King had little symbolic significance and the Prime Minister, Winston Churchill was the representative of the iconicity that the King lacked (Scully 2020, 16). However, the bombing of Buckingham Palace and the King's decision to remain at the palace offset criticism and helped to reinforce the affinity between the people and this apparently new monarchy. George VI together with his wife Queen Elizabeth and his two young daughters, the future Queen Elizabeth II and her sister Margaret, were adeptly benefited by their wartime role. It is worthy of note that George VI became the epitome of fatherhood *for* and *of* the nation (Cannadine 2012, 142). From that moment on, George VI became "the antithesis of his elder brother" (140) placing his iconicity on the idealized image of a domestic royal family. The affinity between the King and his subjects seemed restored. From what has been presented, one might understand that the legacy of George VI to his daughter Elizabeth lies on the bond built around this image of the royal family and the nation opposing the scandalous predecessor. Nevertheless, as it would be analysed in the following section, the reign of Elizabeth II has undergone challenges that resemble the ones present in her uncle's reign.

3. Elizabeth II's Challenges

Queen Elizabeth II (r. 1952–) is the longest-reigning British monarch whose reign has alternated moments of splendid popularity and others of gradual decline. To the purpose of this discussion, the analysis of Elizabeth II's challenges and pivotal moments will be chronologically divided into two different periods of time: on the one hand, post-war Britain (1951–1969) and, on the other hand, the scandalous 1990s–2000s².

3.1. Post-war Britain: Continuity and Humanisation (1951–1969)

One of the greatest challenges that Elizabeth II had to face as a princess and during the first years of her reign was the desperate situation in post-war Britain. In a changing world, Elizabeth, the heir apparent, needed to gain popularity among the people. Given the background, the government decided to organise the Festival of Britain in 1951 to enliven the situation and to lessen the economic and political crisis. Moreover, this seemingly *panem-et-circenses* plan, importantly, aimed to present Britain as a future power and to make the nation proud. Initially, the Festival became a revindication of the nation's glorious past since it also celebrated the centenary of the Great Exhibition in 1851 organized by Queen Victoria. Thus, it "provided the illusion that Britain was recovering from the calamities of the depression and the Second World War, which may have been what the elite wanted the people to believe" (Leventhal 1995, 453). With this in mind, the monarchy seemed to take advantage of this celebration, seeing it as an opportunity to provide a sense of continuity, unity, and recovery. However, it is worthy of note that, for many people of the nation, the Festival would only symbolize and celebrate a specific national identity. Yet "it helped to restore national morale [and] provide something tangible for ordinary people to enjoy" (453), this (white) Britishness did not embrace the whole community since the Commonwealth was not represented. For this reason, this attempt to recover the loyal nationalistic sentiment failed and indicated a decline of the British Empire (Kumar 2000, 594). In any case, this commemoration– remembering the past and praising the future– offered a first glimpse of the necessity to create a sense of stability to the community.

Before Elizabeth II's coronation, in this "aura of nostalgia" (Leventhal 1995, 445), Princess Elizabeth's iconography established a connection with the past, with Elizabeth I, the Virgin Queen (r. 1559–1603). The image of the future Queen recalled that of Elizabeth I's

² In this case, the analysis will focus on the events occurred between the years 1992 and 1997 and there will be references to fictional narratives of the 2000s.

powerful symbolism, heralding the beginning of a new Elizabethan age. Both queens' reigns were inaugurated in a wartime period and their role functioned as icons of prosperity and stability for their nation. Accordingly, the remarkable namesake is interpreted as a possible continuation and resemblance to a symbolic era. During Elizabeth II's preparation to be the heir to the throne, the young princess gave a speech in which she "declar[ed] herself devoted to England and its people" (Moss 2006, 805) echoing Elizabeth I's representation of Englishness and her glorious reign. Furthermore, another trope present in young Elizabeth was the image of perpetual youth and virginity. In the first years, this symbolism moulded the image of the young princess. However, the limited power of Elizabeth II has forced her to change this imagery since "the monarchy has become an icon not of government, power, and glory, but of domesticity and home life" (807). All things considered, this iconography served to consolidate the affinity between England and the future monarch, presenting a possible new Elizabethan age of prosperity that influenced the forthcoming analysis of Elizabeth II's coronation.

In this context of agitation and expectancy, the strengthening of the role of the monarch became vital to hold the community together. Hence, the Coronation of Elizabeth II in 1953 helped to display a concrete symbolism and a set of values associated to the young Monarch as well as to develop a reinvigorated "imagined political community" (De Cillia, Reisigl and Wodak 1991). During this ceremony, the soon-to-be Queen pledged commitment and an oath of loyalty to her people. Importantly, the people engaged with her since they needed someone to represent the nation. This act of communion provided society with someone who embodied "a definite, though usually unspoken, conception of virtue" (Shils and Young 1953, 65). Therefore, the Queen connoted a set of moral values that helped to fortify the socially constructed "imagined community" through the sophisticated and elaborate design of her imagery. To give an illustration, the Queen's Coronation bouquet was symbolic since it consisted of flowers of the four parts of the United Kingdom. This is clearly a way in which "she symbolically proclaim[ed] her community with her subjects, who, in the ritual [...] commit[ed] themselves to obedience within the society constituted by the moral rules which she has agreed to uphold" (68). In other words, this general agreement refers to a "moral consensus of society" (65).

It is worthy of note that society was not only expecting someone to represent and symbolise the unity of the nation; but they were also taking part in a sacred ceremony. It is most revealing to observe that the citizens participated actively in the narrative of a rite that was traditionally private and sacred. This established a new kind of affinity between the Monarch and the crowds that will be present throughout Elizabeth II's reign. To put it another way, what

was considered the “people’s Coronation” (Pimlott 1998, 97) and its performance “bridge[d] the worlds of the secular and the divine as needed and as appropriate, and in the process has drawn millions of loyal followers into the continuing story of the royal House of Mountbatten-Windsor” (Mardsen and Mardsen 1993, 134). Moreover, for the first time in history, this religious ceremony was broadcasted on television, encompassing a wide range of popular spectatorship (Owens 2019, 342). From that moment onwards, the media became intensively active in the creation of Elizabeth’s iconicity. The repercussion of the broadcast of this sacred ritual left a huge legacy that revolutionised and altered the royal iconography. Furthermore, it forced the monarchy to adapt to this expanding mode of communication.

The impact of the Coronation on Elizabeth II’s symbolism is indisputable. The other side of the coin, however, is that the role of the media poses a risk to the Queen’s public image, and thus, to the whole institution. It is necessary to point out that the mystique and the magic around the monarchy myth were traditional elements that attracted the public’s attention (Mardsen and Mardsen 1993, 132). At the same time, the amount of private information accessible to the people broadened out as a result of the role of television during the Coronation. That is why, before the event, there was a heated debate among politicians and advisors about the risk of using television as a channel for greater communication. Nevertheless, the “media representations [that] actively constructed the monarchy as ‘special’” (Clancy 2019, 436) together with the organization of the ceremony controlled the magic deciding to omit some parts of the rite. Therefore, it could be stated that the mediated nature of this icon is based on the role of the “publics” who are the spectators that negotiate the representation of the monarchy in an active process (434). The television’s goal was to facilitate them an intimate access to the divine and idealized vision of the monarch.

Controversially, after the revolutionary televised Coronation, the Monarch and her family agreed on the production of the BBC documentary *Royal Family* (1969) which, according to Blain and O’Donnell, “inaugurated decades of increased public obsession with the royalty” (2003, 166). Following the standards originated in the mass-mediated Victorian era, the Queen needed to adapt to this new form of communication. Thus, opening the doors of the Palace in order to strengthen public support as the Coronation did. It gave an extraordinary insight into their private lives, presenting a conscious illusion of sameness with the “publics” and reinforcing the notion of icon of affinity. However, in reference to Pimlott’s article, there was “an element of double standards” (1998, 91–92). In other words, this narrative was constructed using the information they considered relevant and suitable to present to the royal “publics” and sometimes “editing was used to distort reality and compound an unfortunate

impression” (Smith 2012, 232). During the editing process, certain information and footage were filtered and locked away. Significantly, as regards the sacred parts of the Coronation, the most intimate scenes of the *Royal Family* remained out of the spectatorship sight. In contrast to the pompous Coronation, the BBC documentary seemed an attempt to humanise the royal family. To give an illustration, the Royal Family was filmed eating meals together, sharing family memories and watching their own television—emphasising the importance of this latter in their representation (Cawston 2018). The Queen was portrayed off-duty: she was presented as the matriarch, putting her role as head of state apart. As a result, the national symbols’ representation shifted from public individuals performing in their traditional and royal roles (prince and princesses, dukes, monarch...) to private and domestic figures (sons and daughters, husband, wife, mother...). Therefore, this humanisation reinforced the popular identification with the whole family in a similar way as her father, George VI, sought to.

As stated above, not only did the monarch embody the virtue of the nation, but also her family, the national family (Robins 1995, 114). They were represented as “real” human beings far from the traditional and divine representation that people were used to, becoming a model to the nation, the “icons of a new era” (Pimlott 1998, 96). As a matter of fact, the plan gave priority to narrow the gap between the Institution and the people and, at the same time, it contributed to preserve the royal popularity and prestige. At one point, the participation of the television in the lives of the royal members became intrusive. Thus, the “coverage of the Royals veer[ed] between the American soap opera and the British serialized family melodrama” (Robins 1995, 114)³. All things considered, when the monarchy became aware of the sense of proximity they created, it turned into a risk. In the past, the magic and the mystery might marginalize them. On the contrary, this new “modern” version of the monarchy represented them as ordinary people. At the same time, this familiarity exposed another weakness of the monarchy: people could question the legacy and power of this “ordinary” family. In any case, during the following decades, this image stabilized and still presented a moment of continuity for the monarchy. In the long term, the mediated intimacies will be mixed with sacred rituals. Thus, the following section presents the public appetite for the Royal Family and the risks of this iconography.

³ The concept of “soap opera” must be considered when interpreting the construction of the narrative during the 1990s–2000s.

3.2. Royal Scandals in a (Mass)-Mediated Nation (1990s–2000s)

The early images of Elizabeth's majestic splendour combined with the attempt to humanise the Royal Family were adversely contested in 1992, in her words: "a year on which I shall look back with undiluted pleasure [...] an '*Annus Horribilis*' [emphasis added]" (The Royal Family website, n.d). The British monarch found herself in a tumultuous situation in consequence of her children's private lives. At that moment, a series of scandals affected the stability of the Crown: a period of divorces and infidelities referred in the tabloids as "Squidgygate", "Camillagate" and "Fergiegate" scandals; or Diana's supposed collaboration with Andrew Morton while he was working on his controversial book *Diana: Her True Story*. According to Robins, "[these] divorces and separations should be seen as part of the modernization of the monarchy" (1995, 115), however, at that moment, these collapsing marriages appeared to oppose the moral values that the national family should represent. In many respects, it seemed to symbolize the decay of the Queen's continuity and popularity. The discontented public and, consequently, their perception of the monarchy was "fuelled by cumulative resentment of the royal family's younger generation" (Smith 2012, 378). Additionally, during this fatal year for the monarch, there was a fire at Windsor Castle, an emblem of the nation. In a context of deepening popularity, one of the strategies the Queen's advisors chose was a change in the royal financial plan: they started paying taxes and restored Windsor Castle with her own income. By doing so, people praised the Queen for what was conceived to be a wise decision. In order to overcome the challenge, the Queen and her advisors found a solution to conquer it. Once again, the popularity and therefore, the image of the Queen, depended on the public approval.

To state that the Elizabeth's iconicity depends to a great extent on the role of the mass-mediated and fictional narratives may seem like an obvious statement. In fact, the expanding media, in an age of consumerism, was one of the most troublesome challenges that undermined and questioned the legitimacy of the monarchy. In the aftermath of her "*Annus Horribilis*", celebrity culture redefined the popular image of the monarchy. It is remarkable that, from that moment on, royalty got involved in "a new phase of consumption [of celebrity culture]" (Blain and O'Donnell 2003, 11), presenting the Monarchy as a commodity to satisfy the public's appetite. Scandal after scandal, these intrusive narratives challenged the traditional and "exemplary" values embodied by the members of "an ordinary and extraordinary family" (Olechnowicz, 2007). To delve deeper, attention must be paid to the monarchy's control over the media and its representation in celebrity culture. The former displayed a stricter campaign to construct the monarch's image and the latter required a more active representation, such as

the Queen's cameo in the opening ceremony of the 2012 London Olympics alongside James Bond. Moreover, as Otnes and Maclaran point out "[monarchy's] foibles and failings nonetheless still attract[ed] the interest of many people around the world" (2015, 19), influencing a "tabloid-fueled British society" (19). Hence, the media and the Royal Family coalesced: both focus on the needs of the British public as well as their mediated projections. For these reasons, the fabricated narratives try to seek, principally, the nation's interests. However, for the Royal Family, this phenomenon of "celebrity" culture could be troubling. On the contrary, Diana, the Queen's daughter-in-law, seemed to enjoy her public persona in those stories that charmed the masses.

The effect Diana had on the public perception of the monarchy might be considered a threat to Elizabeth's popularity. In the discursive construction of the British monarchy, Diana's first years as the Princess of Wales embedded her iconic image in a fairy-tale narrative account. Through the study of her iconicity during the first years as a member of the Royal Family, it can be noted that, as Prieto-Arranz claims, Diana embodied the pure image of "purity, innocence and sainthood" (2006, 123). Furthermore, her public persona was characterized by her versatility: she was the representative of "princess, royalty, fashion icon, mother, mourning, nation, and social consciousness" (Helmets 2001, 449). This is what Hames and Leonard refer to as "active symbolism" (1998, 8) to convey a more approachable image. As stated above, this selected symbolism enabled Diana to take advantage of her role in order to engage the public. In her own words, she wanted to become "the Queen of people's hearts" (18). It is worthy of note that this tie was closely related to development of a shared sense of belonging to the English imagined community reinforced by Diana's iconic status that is present in the projections of her image nowadays.

Yet, nevertheless, at a given time, the narrative evolved into what many scholars identify as "royal soap opera", bringing about public debate and a counter-discourse to the previous idealised narrative presented above (Blain and O'Donnell 2003, 84–85). To give an illustration, Diana decided to "confess" and participate in the active construction of her narrative using the famous *Panorama* interview in 1995 as an instrument of communication. According to Abell and Stokoe, "Diana construct[ed] herself in terms of two conflicting identities: her 'true self' and her 'royal role'" (2001, 422). Therefore, Diana must be presented as a mediated icon in the same way as the Queen. In other words, the mass media filled her story with all the fictional elements pertinent to a soap opera. The fairy tale collapsed, and the legal media war between Prince Charles and Lady Diana revealed the worst details within the Royal Family. The media,

again, was a double-edged sword: it was used as an instrument to narrate their stories, although they blamed the reporting for exhibitionism and intrusion.

In effect, the Prince and Princess of Wales's divorce brought to the forefront the obsession, the power that the media exercised over the people's perception of the monarchy. Moreover, it emphasised how the monarchy's narratives were staged as tales of tragedy and romance. However, unfortunately, the greatest challenge was about to come. In the summer of 1997, Diana was involved in a fatal car accident. The death of the Princess of Wales was a tragic turning point in Elizabeth II's reign. For the nation, it became a shared experience of grief since they lost one of their most iconic national "heroines", as presented at the beginning of this essay. To illustrate this popular sentiment, the Prime Minister Tony Blair used the term the "people's princess" in Diana's "people's funeral" in order to present the mutual affection between the people and the Princess whose purpose was to become the "Queen of people's hearts". According to McGuigan, in this specific moment, the popular response turned out to be a "manifestation of the *cultural public sphere*" (2000, 5), a significant event for the construction of the imagined community. In this area, this situation captured the public's attention "through affective—esthetic and emotional—modes of communication" (5) in media representations and popular discourses. Significantly, even nowadays, this attribute is present in Diana's iconicity. For instance, the popular historical-drama series *The Crown* (Netflix 2016–)⁴ has showed in different episodes the lack of affection in contrast to the young Diana. Even considering the fictional nature of the popular drama, this attribute shapes the representation of the Queen. To put it another way, Diana's emotional legacy among the people lacks in the affinity between the Queen and her subjects. It might be argued that even Diana's legacy served to secure, to a great extent, part of the iconic status and the prestige of the modern Monarchy, "the Palace appear[ed] to have decided that the lesson of Diana's life and death concern[ed] the power of glamour rather than the power of her adoption of active symbolism as her key role" (Hames and Leonard 1998, 19). Indeed, the Royal Family undervalued the symbolic power of this icon, and consequently, the negative images of the Royal Family increased.

Equally important is the use fictional although realistic narratives. In this light, the film *The Queen* (2006) focuses on the events after the tragic death of Diana, giving an insight into the different reactions—especially into the Queen, the Prime Minister Tony Blair, and the

⁴ Significantly, this series presents, throughout the four seasons, some of the threats and challenges in Elizabeth II's reign. It has notably affected the perception of the monarchy in present-day society.

popular participation—as well as dramatizing the internal tensions the Queen experiences for being a ruler, a mother and grandmother at the same time (Otnes and Maclaran 2015, 141). It first approaches a public version of the royals presenting Elizabeth’s authority as a sovereign. This discourse is rigorously shaped by her moral and royal duty, illustrated in the majestic *mise-en-scène* in the first shot of the film. The first glimpse offered to the audience is the Monarch posing for a portrait, focusing on the unemotional and stoic image of the sovereign (Frears 2006). Initially, it starts shaping the public perceptions of Elizabeth (played by Helen Mirren) as someone cold and insensitive, following the basic preconceptions that characterised the official iconography of many monarchs in the past. On the surface, this initial image sways the audience perception of the Monarch, and it affects her representation throughout the film. However, when she decides to mourn in private and to continue with her royal duty, even in the worst of the cases, the public in the film response entered a state of turmoil.

Throughout the film, Frears introduces real footage of that moment using a documentary style. Therefore, different narratives intertwine within the film, establishing, on the one hand, the end of the fairy-tale narrative and the mythical perspective, and, on the other hand, emphasizing the critical mass media role and the reaction of the crowds. Furthermore, this realistic perspective was reinforced by the resulting tabloid headlines that criticized the royal protocol and the Queen’s apparent determination. Some of the headlines such as “Show us you care” (in *The Express*) or “Your people are suffering. Speak to us Ma’am” (in *The Mirror*) have been interpreted as a direct vilification of the Queen’s image (Frears 2006). In the film, when she starts to lose support, the plot turns this perception into her private life. Scenes of mourning and crying culminate with her seemingly humanization in her walkabout to express gratitude for the flowers outside the Palace of Buckingham and a speech addressed to the nation. In doing so, according to Higson, “a vital bond [was] created between the body of the monarch, the royal family and the national family” (2016, 353). Besides, the biographer Sally Bedell Smith points out: “[Elizabeth] managed to be a Queen and a grandmother at one and the same time” (2012, 411). In this regard, it might be argued that Diana was more than a threat to the Royal Family: her death reshaped the monarchy as well as the nation. The tension between the public and private sphere was amended in order to regain the popularity the Queen lost caused by this ambivalent presentation of her image. All things considered, as it has already been noted, Elizabeth’s plea for survival is gauged by the humanization of the icon and her duty as the representative of the nation.

4. Conclusion. The Monarchy Now

Elizabeth II's reign is characterised by an innumerable series of challenges. For the nation, Elizabeth is still considered a symbol of unit not only as an important historical character, but also considering her symbolic role in constructing the English national identity. This paper has demonstrated that, from the beginnings to her worst years as a monarch, Elizabeth has adapted to the new challenges and the changing times, enjoying an enduring and widespread popularity even today. On balance, the public support is crucial to retain its symbolic power. In addition, it must be considered the importance of the past: from Elizabeth I's symbolism of grandeur; Victoria's immediacy and identification with the monarch and the royal public; Edward VII's importance of reputation; to George VI construction of the royal family as the family of the nation. In this sense, as it has been presented, her traditional function has been redefined: in order to reinforce the continuity of the British monarchy, Elizabeth's image has progressively been humanised. This illusion of sameness projected, for instance, in her representation as a matriarch in the documentary *Royal Family* (1969) or in the film *The Queen* (2006) distances the Monarch from the "divine right". However, the performance of events such as the Coronation or the royal weddings differentiate the mythical figure of Elizabeth from the ordinary people.

When it comes to the perception and the public image of the Monarch, the function of the media is crucial. The monarchy's image is mediated by means of her decisions and apparent strategies, the media and celebrity cult image, and the image she seeks to convey (i.e. the iconic meaning). As Higson points out, "what are negotiated in these stories are the power of *popularity*, and the *symbolic* status of the monarch as national figurehead [emphasis added]" (2016, 353). Considering Elizabeth as a product of a series of filtrations, it would be senseless to study the image from what the "real Elizabeth" does actively or passively. Having said that, Elizabeth's strategies presented through her mediated image seem to opt to lessen formality establishing a distance between the private and public sphere and intervening in the construction of her mediated intimacies. Therefore, Elizabeth can be considered as an "icon of affinity". However, in contrast to other icons of affinity such as Diana, it remains uncertain how this icon will be disseminated over the years. Together with this analysis, it would be interesting to consider the strategies of reformation and modernisation in relation to today's digital age, that is, for instance, the use of social media and the impact of the current scandals and new icons such as Meghan Markle (Clancy 2021).

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