

“Born a Lady, Married a Prince, Died a Saint”: The Deification of Diana in the Press and Popular Opinion in Britain

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Unless you have been living on another planet, you will know that Diana Princess of Wales, the former Lady Diana Spencer, died in a horrific car accident in Paris on 31 August 1997. She was 36 years old and at the height of her fame and beauty. Perhaps she was also on the brink of a new chapter in her life. Her divorce settlement from the heir to the British throne had been agreed, and she had spent the summer in the company of a handsome international playboy, Dodi Fayed, son of the Egyptian millionaire, Mohammed al Fayed, the owner of Harrods. Rumours were afloat that there was a romance between Dodi and Diana, fuelled by pictures of the pair together on Fayed’s yacht in the Mediterranean, and Diana’s rash retort to bullying pressmen that her next announcement would be a bombshell. Dodi Fayed was killed with Diana as they attempted to avoid photographers in a highspeed chase from the Paris Ritz, where they had wine and dined together and exchanged expensive gifts. The exact cause of their deaths has not so far been established, nor the exact nature of their relationship.

This sensational story, involving royalty, romance, mystery, a car chase, and violent death wiped everything else from the front pages of British newspapers, and still grabs the headlines to this day whenever some new angle is uncovered. In Diana stories, the content of “popular” and “quality” newspapers have converged as they did in war and at the deaths of the wartime King and Prime Minister, though normally they are quite polarised. In the death of Diana, the sort of personal angle pre-

ferred by the tabloids and the historical angle preferred by the qualities have both found an ideal subject (Sparks 1992: 37–41).

After Diana's death had been announced normal broadcasting was suspended, sports fixtures were cancelled, and newspapers rushed to bring out special editions with attention-grabbing headlines. Meanwhile, flowers were being laid in London outside the royal palaces. Later, they were to appear at churches, townhalls, and at other official sites nationwide. Books of Condolence were set up at all these venues so that people could record their thoughts and messages. By the Wednesday following Diana's death, the waiting time to sign one of these books at St James's Palace was said to be 12 hours. The press printed pictures of hysterically weeping people, and the whole nation was depicted as sunk in deep shock and mourning: "a sea of tears in an ocean of flowers" (headline in the *Sunday Mirror*, 07.09.1997: 10–11); "two billion broken hearts" (headline in the *News of the World* 07.09.1997: 14–15). How far this picture of "a nation of tears" was the press's own creation is a moot question. Many witnesses have reported that they saw no noisy exhibitions of grieving and that the crowds were notable for the quietness and gravity of their demeanour (Monger & Chandler 1998: 104).¹ Indeed, some commentators have suggested that the press went deliberately in search of exuberantly weeping people in order to construct their preferred story (see Biddle & Walter 1998: 96–99; also Walter, Littlewood & Pickering 1995). Others, however, believe that there "there can be little doubt that what we witnessed [--] was the articulation of collective emotion" (Watson 1997: 4), and that there had been "undeniably mass grief" which the media "could only watch and follow" (O'Hear 1998: 183). However that might be, public feeling was strong enough to force the Queen to make several concessions to popular opinion, most notably to make a broadcast portraying herself as a bereaved person. It was difficult then – impossible now – to know whether the British people really had abandoned their famed reserve and spontaneously indulged in an orgy of emotion. However, as a folklorist and an anthropologist, we cannot help suspecting that at least part of the effect was caused by the interac-

¹) A similar quietness and decorum was observed among the crowds who assembled for the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II (see Shils & Young 1953: 72).

tion of genuine emotion with powerful cultural images that could be shaped into a number of emotive story-forms.

The storytelling started immediately. Initially, questions about who was responsible for the accident and how it had happened took pride of place with explorations of Diana as an emblem of modern tragedy like Marilyn Monroe, Elvis Presley, or J. F. Kennedy.² But, as the funeral approached, it was sentimental angles that dominated, and Diana was depicted as a fairytale heroine, a victim, a saint, and, in the Prime Minister's famous words, the "People's Princess." These are the stories that have endured to become the dominant popular discourse today, and which are the focus of this presentation. During her lifetime there had been other ways to respond to Diana, but her untimely death closed many of them off. In May of this year, for example, the popular press were outraged at the publication of an essay in which the author described the Princess as a muddled, self-obsessed woman who failed to understand her royal role (O'Hear 1998: 183). During her lifetime a substantial section of the British people would have approved these views. After her death, they became literally unspeakable.

Though, for the sake of simplicity, we shall be dealing with the various themes separately, they are part of an apparently seamless structure. When Diana fails to meet with the saintly ideals, the discourse switches into the victim image; when that fails to fit, Diana becomes the fairytale heroine. This image-switching does not cause any difficulty to speakers and hearers, and is hardly noticed, because the images are connected, not by logic, but by a sort of moral emotion. Together, they provide closure for Diana's lifestory. They also unfold a vision of ideal kingship. We think it is not insignificant that after her death she was widely acclaimed as "Queen of Hearts." It is this theme with which our presentation concludes.

It is as "fairytale" heroine, however, that the press most frequently constructed Diana in the immediate aftermath of her

²) The similarities to the lives and deaths of Marilyn Monroe, John F. Kennedy, Grace Kelly, Elvis Presley, Eva Peron, and so on were endlessly mined. Less obvious comparisons, however, were made by the more adventurous feature-writers; these included Princess Astrid, Joan of Arc, Marie Antoinette, Mary Queen of Scots, Dylan Thomas, Jimi Hendrix, Buddy Holly, Otis Redding, and the poets Keats and Shelley.

death. Alongside innumerable references to her “fairytale romance” and “fairytale wedding,” they indulged in more extended metaphorical fancies. “Surely she was immortal like other fairytale princesses?” mourned one columnist (Moore 1997: 13). “No earthly prince can wake her,” read a printed message in the *Daily Mail* (3 September 1997: 19). Changing the allusion, a leader in *The Independent* (1 September 1997: 8) was headed “The beauty that couldn’t tame the beast.” But it is as Cinderella that she was chiefly portrayed: “It was a fairytale alright [wrote a columnist famed for her venom] [---] a version of Cinderella in which the unsuspecting, virtuous heroine was not plucked from isolation and cruelty [---] but rather condemned to it [---] [F]rom the scraps she was thrown, sitting there in her sumptuous scullery, she made a life [---] amidst the Gothic gloom of our own House of Usher.” (Birchill 1997: 5).

Even where *Märchen* were not directly invoked, the Diana story was told according to folktale conventions. Though, as far as we know, no-one has yet produced a checklist of the typical characteristics of the *Märchen* heroine,³ it would be easy to put one together using the features attributed to Diana. “Young, beautiful, vulnerable and virtuous,” the archetypal story would go, “the heroine is subjected to the mindless malice of powerful forces, who bring her low and make her suffer. She battles patiently on, helped by the love of the natural or supernatural world. Eventually a further transformation brings the story to a close with the triumph of the heroine, her escape from suffering, or the downfall of her enemies.” This is exactly how the Diana story was told in numerous headlines: “The saviour spurned by the court” (*The Times*, 01.09.1997: 24); “A simple heart in a heartless world” (*Ibid.*); “Diana [---] embodied the right to follow the law of the heart. And what was on the other side? Repressed emotions, crabbed age, protocol which crushes the young and eager heart, a court fenced off from the ‘real world’” (Ascherson 1997: 22); or, our favourite because it gives a modern twist to an old theme: “We all knew that Di was defending herself and her kids from an alien life-form with acid for blood.” (Simpson 1997: 16). Readers’ messages printed in the press or written on floral

³) For a study of the hero, see Lord Raglan 1965.

tributes echoed these themes: “You were our fairytale Princess, who’s now a sleeping beauty.” Similar sentiments were expressed by people in the crowd who waited to see her funeral cortège pass by: “she was a universal human being who [---] could rise above all the adversity she had in her life [---] all the tragedy, terrible marriage”; “she always was a fairytale Princess and it broke our hearts to know that what we saw on the outside, the inside was being torn apart [---]”⁴

The Diana story, thus told, has two possible endings. In one, the heroine triumphs over her enemies. According to this scenario, the Royal Family were standing on the very brink of destruction. In headlines and comment the press announced: “Rock bottom support for the monarchy” (headline in the Manchester Evening News 31.08.1997: 21), “The crown tarnished before our eyes” (headline in the Observer 07.09.1997: 7), and so on. Interestingly, those who attempted to defend the royals did not argue that the Royal Family had behaved well or that change was not needed or that their position was secure; instead, they portrayed them as having “really” loved Diana all along.

According to the other ending of the Diana *Märchen*, the battered beauty escapes from the wicked family who do not know how to value her and walks into the embrace of her “real” Prince Charming. It is significant that from the moment of Diana’s death, press and public alike ceased to sneer at the romance between the princess and the playboy, and began to portray Diana and Dodi’s affaire as true love. There could thus be a happy, if posthumous, ending to the story. “She’s at peace for the first time in so many years,” said one bystander. “They loved together and they died together,” said another. “At least we know she found love and happiness at the end of her life which is some consolation to us all.” This, too, was Mohamed Fayed’s own closure on the story: “God took them to live together in Paradise.” (quoted in the Daily Mirror 02.09.1997: 2). Perhaps the most pleasing version of this “Happy Ever After” formula was written on a bunch of flowers left at Kensington Palace:

⁴) Unless otherwise stated, quotations from messages left for Diana or from bystanders at Kensington Palace or on the funeral route are taken from Anne Rowbottom’s fieldnotes.

Diana and Dodi

RIP

God Bless you Both

The world will never forget you

May you have as much fun in Heaven as you did in St Tropez.

(quoted in Monger & Chandler 1998: 104)

However, the most enduring image has been of Diana as a secular saint. The context for this image is popular religiosity. Though Christian clerics are wont to regret the declining figures for church attendance, Britain is not entirely the secular society they deplore. Figures for 1991–1995 in the most recent edition of UK *Religious Trends*, show quite high percentages of people believing in God, especially women and the over 55s. In addition, a smaller percentage of people said they believed in “a Higher Power of some kind.” (Brierley 1998–1999, Table 5.13). Even more convincing figures were obtained from a recent survey into attitudes to burial and cremation which took into account adherents of religions other than Christianity in Britain. Here, the researchers found that only 168 out of 1603 people surveyed in 3 British cities said they were agnostic or atheist. The vast majority of the respondents were prepared to give a religious affiliation of some sort (Davies 1995: 130, Table 1). Though figures like these do not prove that British people are religious in any formal sense, they do indicate that they are unwilling to completely turn their back on religious practice and worldview. It has been suggested that in recent years there has been a rise in “non-aligned spirituality” (Bowman 2000). Instead of attending the services provided in the traditional churches, many people have been believers not belongers (see Davie 1994); and many have devised their own vernacular forms (see Primiano 1995) ransacking the spiritual supermarket for ideas suited to their personal needs. Especially among young people, many are “seekers”.⁵ As Colleen McDannell has put it: “People construct meanings using a set of theological and cultural ‘tools’ to build responses to their own spiritual, psychological, and social longings” (McDannell 1995: 17). The crowds who converged on London, and who were photographed by the press, were mourn-

⁵ See Steven Sutcliffe’s (1997) useful categorisation of religious adherence.

ing within the framework of this popular religiosity with its generalised spirituality, its magpie selection of religious imagery and doctrine, its elevation of feeling, and its improvised ceremonies.

In this context, one significant trend has been the reinvention of ceremony both within and outside the institutional churches. This is particularly noticeable in rites of passage. Within the established church, the *Alternative Service Book* (1980) presents revised forms of baptism, marriage and burial which have angered traditionalists by the language of feeling being substituted for doctrinal correctness (Mullen 1998: 109–113); outside the Church, people often tailor these important ceremonies to their own requirements.

About five years ago, British folklorists, anthropologists and sociologists suddenly woke up to the fact that violent or accidental deaths were being customarily marked by the laying of flowers and other gifts at the home of the deceased or at the scene of the death. There has been some discussion about whether this practice is an entirely modern phenomenon in Britain; and, if so, at what point it became customary rather than occasional. A folklorist colleague has tracked down several instances from the early years of this century (Monger 1997: 113); another colleague, a sociologist, has suggested that the idea of laying flowers was probably disseminated by TV coverage of the Hillsborough football stadium disaster in 1989, when camera footage showed a carpet of flowers being laid for dead fans at the home ground of one of the teams (Walter 1996: 106; see also Walter 1991). But certainly, it has been the usual public response to death by violence or accident for perhaps the past eight or nine years.

Though they are plainly multivalent and may carry any number of meanings, we like to see the gifts that are laid for the dead as primarily love-tokens. (If you look at what is actually presented on these occasions they are typically the sorts of things one gives as expressions of affection – literally hearts and flowers, also cuddly toys, sentimental cards, and things that are precious and personal to the giver.⁶) However, there were enough

⁶) Gifts for Diana included a pair of ballet shoes, a pair of bikers' boots, a Tee-shirt, head-band and road map. Also, an old 78 inch record with the message, "This record is one of my most prized possessions. But I would like you to have it" (see Monger & Chandler 1998: 104).

religious overtones in the presentations for Diana to lead many people to interpret them as “offerings,” and the press invariably referred to the sites at which the gifts were laid as “shrines.” Alongside the flowers and toys were items with a religious or vaguely “spiritual” significance – candles, joss sticks, holy pictures, prayer cards, lilies – and these were often accompanied by what we think may be regarded as icons of Diana, photographs and drawings, and especially the Queen of Hearts playing card. In one notable example, observed by folklorists George Monger and Jennifer Chandler, a “sacred heart” picture had Jesus’s heart cut out and replaced with a picture of Diana.⁷ These displays were often accompanied by prayers, home-made verses, or messages.⁸

These were most often directly addressed to Diana herself – “Diana, our thoughts are with you”; “Rest in peace, beautiful lady”; “We’ll look after your boys.” These sentiments clearly imply the sort of vaguely spiritual beliefs in a universal afterlife that are encapsulated in newspaper “In Memoriam” columns (see Dégh 1994), and in verses commonly given to the newly-bereaved.⁹ They also reflect popular ideas about the transmutation of the good dead into saintly intercessors for the living (see Bennett 1987: 61–81; Davies 1997: 153–162).

In towns and cities, many shops created “shrines” in their windows by showing photographs of Diana alongside vaguely funerary or religious displays made up of urns, flowers and drapes (see Bowman 1998: 100). The tabloid press also created shrines to Diana within the pages of their newspapers. Their staff photographers toured the memorial sites in London taking pictures of the individual gifts and messages left there. They also invited

⁷) This mixture of sacred and secular is not without precedent. At the service held in Liverpool RC Cathedral for the victims of the Hillsborough stadium disaster, for example, members of the congregation laid football regalia, scarves, shirts and favours, on the altar during and after the service. See Walter 1991.

⁸) For a more detailed account of the love tokens left for Diana, see *Flowers for the Princess* by Rowbottom (forthcoming).

⁹) See, for example, Canon Scott Holland’s verses “Death is nothing at all” and Mary Fry’s “Do not stand at my grave and weep.” Both these sets of verses were reproduced full-page in two Sunday tabloids beside pictures of Diana, one under the heading “Thought for the Day” (also the title of a popular early-morning radio religion-slot) (see Sunday Mirror 07.09.1997: 47; News of the World 07.09. 1997: 13).

their readers to send in their own messages and memories. All these were then printed in double-page spreads: the centre was a picture of the carpets of flowers laid at the Royal palaces, the borders were composed of readers' and visitors' messages reproduced in their original form, and a banner headline with a sentiment such as "Britain lost a Princess, Heaven gained a queen" (The Sun 02.09.1998: 24–25) framed the whole display.

Religion was also invoked in a number of stories that linked Diana with saints and churches, or implied that she had recently had some sort of spiritual crisis or conversion. One journalist unearthed a report that one of her distant ancestors was about to be canonised (Bunyan 1997: 5); another suggested that before her death she had made secret visits to a Carmelite chapel in Kensington to pray "in front of the statue of a young female saint who led a troubled life with parallels to her own" (Morgan 1997: 19); others reported that mourners waiting to leave their gifts and messages had seen "visions" of her.¹⁰ Stories and headlines continued the religious theme. Her good works and her perceived warmth and gentleness of heart were an invariable focus, helped out by the portrayal of her relationship with the Windsors as a form of martyrdom, and her death as a final sacrifice to her celebrity.

These journalistic themes were not plucked out of thin air; they reflected the language and sentiments of many mourners. A verse left with a bunch of flowers at St James's Palace read:

Diana

We know what we'll see when we look in the sky
A new star is there – yes, it's our Princess Di
A star that is brighter than any above
Because it shines down with all of her love.

In prose, but no less poetically, a woman standing beside the funeral route expressed similar sentiments: "[---] she gave of her love, and she gave – it was so genuine so undiluted, it just poured from her [---]". Many messages printed in the press called for Diana to be canonised: "Thank you for the love you gave to the poor, may the Lord make you a saint"; "Diana should be made

¹⁰ See, for example, Marks (1997: 5). See also, item under heading "Early Campers in Abbey Vigil" in the *Guardian* (05.09.1997: 5).

patron saint of Britain.” Others already accorded her sainthood: “Saint Diana, the irreplaceable Patron Saint of Love,” one printed message read.

But it was through the visual images that the canonisation of Diana was completed by the press. The most frequently printed pictures of the dead princess showed her cuddling sick children. The most popular of all showed her robed in a floaty blue gown, holding a scarred child on her lap, looking down at him with a prayerful countenance. The headline to this picture in one paper was a quotation: “Anywhere I see suffering is where I want to be, doing what I can” – plainly, readers are being invited to see Diana as the Madonna (The Sunday Times Style Supplement 07.09.1997: 47). Another much printed photograph showed her with Mother Theresa of Calcutta: the two women face each other with their hands folded in a greeting which looks like a prayer; both are dressed in white and Diana is leaning attentively towards the diminutive nun. Again the quotation makes the connection: “You know you could not do my work and I could not do yours. We are both working for God. Let us do something beautiful for God.” (The Daily Telegraph 08.09.1997: 80)

This brings us to our final point. Why was Diana so consistently portrayed as the “People’s Princess” and the “Queen of Hearts,” that is, as “royal” in some special way?

There are several possible cultural connections between sanctity, Christian deeds and royalty. The history of our islands is mostly famous for its heroic failures, but there were ten royal personages in the first millenium who were canonised or venerated as saints: and in the second millenium there have been two; Henry V, the hero of the battle of Agincourt, who was widely regarded as a saint for many generations, and Henry VI who might have been canonised if his successor (the notoriously grasping Henry VII) had not been too mean to pay the fee the Pope demanded. Academic studies of the last fifty years have also drawn attention to a connection between religion, virtue and kingship in British popular sentiment about the Royal Family.¹¹ One of

¹¹) There are remarkably few of these, but see: Billig 1992; Birnbaum 1955; Blumler et al. 1971; Boccock 1985; Hayden 1987; Nairn 1988; Prochaska 1995; Rose & Kavanagh 1976; Rowbottom 1998; Shils & Young 1953; Wilson 1989; Zeigler 1977. The only anthropologist to seriously investigate British (rather than African) kingship was A. M. Hocart in a chapter entitled “In the Grip of Tradition” which looked at the abdication crisis of 1936 (see Hocart 1970).

the earliest papers to deal with the present reign, Edward Shils and Michael Young's "The Meaning of the Coronation," concluded that "the monarchy has its roots in man's beliefs and sentiments about what he regards as sacred." (Shils & Young 1953: 64). On a more domestic scale, a survey conducted twenty years ago asked people to say who was the earliest King or Queen they could name. Ninety percent picked out the "virtuous" monarchs of the previous hundred years and passed over the less admirable ones completely (Rose & Kavanagh 1976: 550).

The connection has also been made in the education of recent British monarchs. As part of their preparation for kingship, Kings George V and VI studied the writings of Walter Bagehot (see Cannadine 1984: 107, 1992; see also Cannon 1987: 17). In his great work *The English Constitution* (1867), Bagehot said that, though the idea of divine kingship was now untenable, the monarchy had a religious sanction which "confirms all our political order." (Bagehot 1867; 1928: 33). His rather dour interpretation of the monarch's role has been the model for the House of Windsor ever since it began calling itself that. From him they learnt that kings should be aloof and solitary and maintain a certain mystique; they should be removed from party politics, from enemies and desecration; they should be wise, and embody the domestic virtues (Ibid.: 40–48). Academic studies of what people expected of their monarchs undertaken in the 1970s largely reflected this traditional pattern (see, for example, Blumer et al. 1971; Zeigler 1977); and popular hagiographies of the Royal Family written in the 70s and 80s confirm the picture. Robert Lacey's book *Majesty* portrays the Queen as conscientious about her public duties and enjoying a "quiet evening at home"; Elizabeth Longford's *Elizabeth R* attributes to her the virtues of dignity, courage, energy, self-discipline and conscientiousness (see, for example, Lacey 1977: 223–224; Longford 1983: 9–11).

The Royal Family's image as this kind of monarch has been severely dented in recent years, especially because of the model's equation of fitness for rule with domestic virtues. The divorce of three of the Queen's four children and the antics of the Duchess of York have undermined the Windsor's reputation as upholders of family virtues. Prince Charles's admitted longterm adultery, Diana's well-publicised reference to herself as the "Prisoner of

Wales,” and, of course, her television interview in which she portrayed herself as a woman wronged by a man, and that man as unfit to be king, all added to the damage.

Diana herself of course, never fitted Bagehot’s model, and the stripping from her of her HRH title after her divorce could be interpreted as motivated by a desire to distance her from the Royal Family and limit any damage she might do to its image. If so, it backfired. After her death every action of the Royal Family was scrutinised for signs that the Queen did not regard Diana as really royal. Her failure to return to London immediately to lead the public mourning was particularly badly taken, and the more press and public believed that Diana was being rejected, the more they were eager to demonstrate that, for them, she was not only indubitably “royal,” but their preferred royal. A growing theme was that there was a better way of being royal than the House of Windsor knew about. “She was a sweet princess,” said one message, “and for me the real Royal Family.” Another addressed to Diana said: “The Royals didn’t deserve you. You showed the world what ‘Royalty’ is all about.” We suspect that this aspect of the mourning for Diana indicates that substantial numbers of British people in the 1990s are rejecting Bagehot’s sober model of the ideal monarch and looking for something more in tune with their needs.

We might seek this new ideal by recalling another way in which saintliness and kingship might be culturally connected. This is a familiar narrative connection drawn from the folktale themes with which we began. Many *Märchen* celebrate a natural aristocracy of courtesy and gentleness and reward those who possess these qualities by elevating them to the real aristocracy; so youngest sons gain royal brides, and scullerymaids win the heart of kings. In the world of the *Märchen*, kindness and sympathy with the downtrodden constitute a claim to the throne. Diana was, of course, consistently portrayed in just these terms. It is interesting in this respect that commentators in the press routinely suggested that the values that informed the mourning for Diana were the sensibilities (or, from another point of view, the sentimentalities) which had brought “New Labour” to power the previous year. In other words, in claiming Diana as “royal,” they were affirming the need for “heart” in national life.

There is another way that we might suggest that the traditional reliance on the Bagehotian ideal had failed the Royal Family. Bagehot had advised the monarch that his duties were “grave, formal, important, but never exciting.” By adhering to this model, the Windsors came to be seen as coldhearted, aloof, and miserably dull in contrast to Diana. The mourning for her had a strong element of yearning for excitement in national life, for something that would bring Britain glamour and glory. A leader in the *Daily Mirror* on 4 September perceptively pinpoints this longing, so I’ll quote it almost in full:

By every standard, this is the most supreme display of emotion this country has seen. It has reached deep inside the British people in a manner that seems beyond explanation.

After decades when the people of this country seemed to be losing their national identity, we have found one[---]

[---] in recent years it has at times been hard to find something to be proud of.

But we are proud of Diana. Proud that this country could produce someone who so captured and captivated the world’s heart.

The glory that she brought us puts our sporting and other failures into perspective. Here was someone who was a symbol of our nation and also a symbol of grace, charity and humanity. (*Daily Mirror* 04.09.1997: 11)

I wonder whether I am alone in finding this talk of “glory,” “grace,” “charity” and “humanity” strongly reminiscent of Camelot, King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table? Arthur is better known than almost any of Britain’s historical kings. Immortalised in verse, films, musicals, and children’s classics; locked into the seascape in local legends about the lost land of Lyonesse and into the landscape in innumerable “Arthur’s Seats” – the “once and future king” provides a narrative template of courtly kingship, a heady mix of glamour, virtue, and heroic action.

It is interesting in this respect that, in the forthcoming issue of *Folklore* Marion Bowman records that on the day after Diana’s death she was travelling to a conference and fell into conversation with a member of the British Order of Druids, a neo-pagan

religious group who see themselves as following ancient Celtic religion and practice. To quote briefly, this is what the Druid argued:

Diana Spencer was of the ancient British royal bloodline. Her “arranged marriage” to Charles had been engineered to re-introduce this ancient bloodline and legitimise the House of Windsor [---] The British people warmed so much to Diana because they instinctively recognised she was truly royal, their “real” monarch [---] Prince William, whose name is William Arthur, was born on the summer solstice; if he were to follow the ancient custom of kings using their second name, he would become King Arthur. Thus, through Diana, the ancient British royal bloodline would be restored to power, with a new King Arthur for the new millenium. (Bowman 1998: 101)

As Marion remarked, “This is as yet not a widely articulated reading of events,” but what a story it makes! In it, the narrative performance that was the mourning for Diana, reaches its apotheosis by writing her into a legendary history that suffuses the past with splendour and promises that the glory days will come again.

Through their gifts and messages and the stories they wove about her, those who mourned the princess had provided closure for her life. They had presented her with all that she had lacked, and given her back to herself in perfected form – loved, happy, crowned, beatified, immortal. But they had given themselves a gift too – a touch of magic, a glimpse of Camelot, a queen who made them “proud to be British.”

We want to end by presenting an image that, for us, encapsulates many of the themes we have been discussing. It was printed in the “Style” supplement of the *Sunday Times* on the 7th September (page 28), the day after Princess Diana’s funeral. In the foreground we can see a beautiful, golden-haired woman, the sun shining on her hair like a halo. She is dressed in green, the colour of renewal; and she is wearing a poppy, the symbol of remembrance for those who gave their lives for their country. In her left hand she carries two or three love-tokens in the form of bouquets of flowers. One has a note attached to it on pink paper. Behind her, the symbol of nationhood, the union flag, is being waved by happy girls and boys, symbols of the future. She is on

bended knee, her right hand on her breast, and she is looking up at the children in an attitude of devotion.

What more needs to be said? This is the woman who was “Born a Lady, Married a Prince, Died a Saint.”

Comment

The material for this essay is drawn from research conducted by the authors in the immediate aftermath of the death of Diana. Gillian Bennett sampled six daily newspapers and four weeklies for a month and recorded TV coverage over the same period. Anne Rowbottom mingled with the crowds gathered at public places in London, talked to people, made fieldnotes, and photographed the messages and flowers left there. She also interviewed research contacts known to be enthusiastic royalists.

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