Review: Getting it Right
Reviewed Work(s): The Queen by Stephen Frears and Peter Morgan
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GETTING IT RIGHT

Screenplay by Peter Morgan.

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The English film director Stephen Frears, though not usually recognized by critics as a master auteur, has long evidenced an instinct for what makes a cinematic subject and what it takes to bring it off. He has a capacity to bring out the best in actors (both leading players and those in supporting roles); a nice sense of timing; an ear for language and accent; a dramatist’s feel for the affective rhythms that roll character into fate; and a sharp eye for humor. He always finds the comedy in tragedy, and the tragedy in comedy. Great actors and screenwriters love to work with him: the scripts and stars he chooses have more than once been selected for Academy Award nominations.

These journeyman qualities are on proud display in his perfectly proportioned new movie The Queen, which will doubtless make film lovers look once again at his earlier oeuvre — at My Beautiful Launderette, Dangerous Liaisons, Prick Up Your Ears, and The Grifters — and perhaps revalue his considerable psychological gifts. Here Frears treats, as if by divine right and with a royal touch, Queen Elizabeth II, miraculously impersonated, under the spell of his direction, by the fine actress Helen Mirren. As mediated by Mirren, the Queen faces Frears’ camera bearing the commonest and most fearsome of human problems — the difficulty we all have in summoning feeling that is appropriate for the big events in our lives. Perhaps the film works so well

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because this role is that kind of event in Mirren’s career.

In *The Queen*, the occurrence, both awkward and archetypal, that confronts Elizabeth is the death of Princess Diana. This public calamity has come only a year after the princess embarrassed the British royal family to its core by divorcing Elizabeth’s hapless son, Charles, heir to a throne that Diana publicly declared him unfit to hold. Diana’s death is being mourned in unprecedented degree by the public, which expects the Sovereign to preside over their wet display of spontaneous feeling, the one demand of her job the dry Elizabeth is just not up to.

As we contemplate Elizabeth’s incorrigible stiffness, we find that we are not only embarrassed for her but with her. Most of us are more like her than we know in preferring to contemplate the archetypal moments of our lives in private. An archetypal intrusion, however, is an event in the collective unconscious with power to link us to others in the human group: we see that we will be judged by how we respond.

One would not expect a commercial motion picture about Diana’s death, which occasioned in England an outpouring of mourning so profound that it led even Jungian analysts to contemplate the phenomenon, to be a comedy of manners, but that is just what Frears is able to shape his film to become. The way the Queen resists the human display that is expected of her, too, is irresistibly droll, but at the same time deeply moving. The one time she cries — alone — her back is to the camera. Her stalling is egged on by the attitudes of two powerful families — her own, which except for her callowly intuitive son Charles, fails to recognize the public relations problem she is creating by her insistence that this is a private matter for them; and the political family of the new Labor Prime Minister, Tony Blair, which is aligned with the people and against the monarchy. Blair’s people — his teasingly insinuating wife Cherie, who thinks the monarchy should be abolished, and his satiric chief speechwriter and public relations officer, Alistair — do get how serious a gaffe the Queen’s refusal to make any public sign or statement is, and they support Blair entirely in pointing that out to her; but they actually relish the Queen’s image being tarnished by her choice of privacy over public confession.

The Royal Family’s Scottish retreat, Balmoral, represents for the Queen a world of introverted feeling in which she can be comfortable, at least when she is entirely alone. Her family, to whom she instinctively turns in the difficult days after she receives the cumbersome news of Diana’s death, is inevitably disappointing. Her husband Philip, the Duke of Edinburgh, can think of no better consolation for the boys who have lost their mother (if the monarchy survives, one of them will be a future King of England) than to distract them with “stalking” a prize stag that has appeared on the partially forested slopes of the estate. Her “mummy” (The Queen Mother, also an Elizabeth) confines herself to reciting the norms of royal protocol, for which Diana’s death offers no precedent. The Queen’s son, the nervous Prince Charles, whose adulterous liai-
son with Camilla Parker-Bowles had been revealed to all the world by Diana as the basis for her divorce, thus seriously qualifying his right to succession, takes this opportunity to remark to his mother that whatever Diana had been like to them she was a wonderful mother, never afraid to show her feeling for her sons, even in public. The three Job's comforters are poisonously rendered by expert character actors, but Mirren's Elizabeth is armed with an antiserum: as the Sovereign, she recognizes that she must choose her own counselors and make her own path.

Mirren's Elizabeth, though carrying the stony bland stare that the real Queen Elizabeth II is so famous for (in my experience, the only time America's greatest comedian, Bob Hope, wasn't funny was during a command performance in Washington when she sat in the front row), is a master of disguise. She likes to cloak herself in what looks like introversion and to argue dryly for the necessity of handling feeling in private, but she is neither an introvert nor without a capacity to convey feeling. The Queen's problem, as Mirren's psychologically literate performance makes clear, is intuition. She is miserable and stony in the first days after the tragedy because she has not really connected with what Diana's death means, and that is the real reason she is not prepared to meet a public that is so obviously — if uncomprehendingly — moved by the tragedy.

While the Queen, struggling to trace her own sense of it all, drives herself around the Estate in an old jeep, a far more public version of the drama is unfolding in London. There Tony Blair, just a couple months in office, is hyper-conscientious about keeping abreast of the public's feeling. He sees it as the Queen's duty to attend to the grief of her people, and his, as her Prime Minister, to advise her to do so. His grasp of the magnitude of the event has already given him the stature of a Churchill in the press: in a prescient elegy crafted the day after the death by his scriptwriter Alastair, he calls Diana "the People's Princess," and he follows that lead in trying, with the Queen, to become the People's Prime Minister. He keeps phoning Her Majesty to advise her to make the right extraverted feeling moves to secure her standing with her subjects — to fly the royal standard at half-mast over Buckingham Palace (the Queen refuses because it would break with protocol to use it for anything but as a signal that the sovereign is in the palace); to end her silence by making a public statement to lead the people in their grief ("THEIR grief," she exclaims); and to come to London to be with the mourners ("If you're suggesting I drop everything and come down to London before I attend to two boys that have just lost their mother you're mistaken"). From a Jungian point of view, he epitomizes the introverted thinking hero who has decided how a feeling matter must be handled: the more Tony Blair experiences rebuke from the Queen's refusal to take up his suggestions, the more convinced he becomes that his definition of the situation is the right one.

The history the film records (still fresh in the memories of many of its viewers) — how Elizabeth is finally forced to yield to all of Blair's demands
by making, at the end of the week, the gestures he has asked for all along — would seem simply to support him, but the film, like its subject, is deceptive. Blair learns at least as much about timing, and political survival, from the Queen. By waiting, and even drawing the ire of her subjects, the Queen is all the more effective when she finally appears in their midst. This only happens once her private mourning is complete, punctuated by two private audiences with the stag her husband and grandsons have been rather mindlessly hunting. The stag, a medieval allegory of Christ, and also of Christian *superbia* (the pride one can take in ruling one’s human instincts, for instance), seems in the film to represent divine right, the archetype that is passing away in the age of easy access to the masses through the media that Diana and Blair (and Frears) understand so well. The mystery of the divine in transformation is to be experienced, not explained, but from a psychological point of view we can say without spoiling the effect that her scenes with the stag represent the moments in which the Queen, from her own extraverted sensation standpoint, finally connects with the introverted intuition she needs to realize that the time for *superbia* has passed for the royals. Asserting divine right is no longer the way to carry her authority; rather, she has to have the humility to be a Presence, even if an unpopular one, in the midst of her subjects. When at last she encounters first hand a throng of mourners outside Buckingham Palace, the scene renders convincingly her confrontation with collective emotion. Blair, watching on TV (in a sequence that deserves comparison to the one in *Schindler’s List* of Schindler watching the little girl in red move through the chaotic liquidation of the Krakow ghetto), suddenly finds his own uncalculated extraverted feeling and sees what the royal touch really means for a country. Blair’s smart, feminist wife, who suspects her husband of a “mother thing” with Elizabeth, and of being one more Labor prime minister to go gaga for the Queen, cannot follow the development of his feeling with her extraverted thinking, nor can the tricksterish speechwriter who is caught in limning the Queen’s insincerity. Blair turns on the latter with appealing ferocity, in one of the great movie speeches: “You know when you get it wrong, you REALLY get it wrong!” Just as Elizabeth, with her irrational process, has connected with her intuition, he, through the force of his reason, has connected with his feeling.

When prime minister and queen meet again in the fall, it is before a fountain in the palace gardens that presents itself, seen from above, as a stately English mandala. For a Jungian, this familiar symbol of wholeness reflects the psychological design of the film, denoting the integrity of consciousness, achieved by the crossed union of opposite psychological types on both the rational and irrational axes. Blair’s union of high and low, achieved by extending himself beyond his superior introverted thinking to arrive at authentic and no longer insecure extraverted feeling, is crossed, as it were, by the link that the Queen has been able to make between her reliable extraverted sensation and her newfound
introverted intuition. Her insight parallels the discovery made by the Prime Minister (whom she will now be able to helpfully advise) that rule is never a right, but rather a responsibility to care for people. She has surpassed the role of sovereign to find her more embodied authority as the mother of the country, a needed balance to patriarchal rule.

ENDNOTES
2. Specific lines from the film are given as they appear in the published screenplay (Peter Morgan, *The Queen*. New York, Hyperion, 2006).

ABSTRACT
John Beebe, “Getting It Right”, *Jung Journal: culture & psyche*, 2007, 1:2, 49-53. Stephen Frears’s film *The Queen* (2006), which stars Helen Mirren as Queen Elizabeth II of England, is reviewed by a Jungian analyst who finds in it the record of a growth of consciousness about the way a country may be governed. Elizabeth and her new Labor Prime Minister, Tony Blair, though different in age, styles, and values, are forced to confer in the summer of 1997 when the sudden death of Princess Diana has created a public relations crisis that threatens the monarchy. The movie becomes a comedy of manners focusing on the Queen’s inability to comprehend why for political reasons she must participate in her subjects’ mourning and on Blair’s refusal to let her off the hook. That the Queen is finally able to listen to her Prime Minister and develop beyond this impasse suggests a potential for much greater integrity in the future governance of England. As the Queen picks up on the mood of the country, her bred-in assumption that a ruler stays in power by divine right is gradually sacrificed in favor of an understanding that the ruler has power only to the extent that his or her subjects can feel that their feelings are being respected. Using Jung’s theory of psychological types, the author tracks the different kinds of consciousness that are represented by the two central characters of this film, who by extending themselves learn to complement and cooperate with each other, assuring not only their continuance in power, but also the continuity of the realm.

KEY WORDS