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Abstract

This paper is a reflection on the contribution of the image of the Queen Mother to the cultural construction of role models of positive ageing. The interest lies in the Queen Mother's performance in public of her roles as woman and royal personage particularly as she grew older. It is suggested that cultural analysis of the icon of the Queen Mother as a blend of gender and power suggests certain significant parallels with the imagery cultivated around the career of Queen Victoria in the later years of her life.

Keywords:

Emotions; Gender; Images Of Ageing; Positive Ageing; Royal Family

The Queen Mother

1.1

For [Homans and Munich \(1997\)](#) the influence of Queen Victoria reaches down the years to touch the present monarchy. The memory of Queen Victoria, they argue, 'haunts the English royal imagination; she has long shaped the idea of how good queens behave...Elizabeth's royal persona draws upon Victoria's methods of being a queen, from its carefully managed public appearances to its insistence upon the monarchy as an articulator of moral values.' (7-8) When Queen Victoria died at the age of 81 on January 22, 1901 she appeared to both her immediate family and the wider public to be indomitable. Although preoccupied with her failing health and, in the final period of her life, unable to walk without assistance: 'any reports that she was ill annoyed her intensely, and she had been known in her old age to go out of her way to fulfil some public duty, even coming down from Balmoral to do so, rather than allow it to be supposed that she was really unwell.' ([Hibbert 2000](#): 489). Whilst she regularly complained of a number of the physical problems usually associated with ageing - failing eyesight, sciatica, rheumatism, digestive problems, and insomnia - she contrived in public 'to seem almost agile' ([Hibbert 2000](#): 489)

1.2

As with Queen Victoria, the model of royalty epitomised by the Queen Mother in her later years was of a personage who was rarely deterred by her chronological age from the performance of her ceremonial duties. In this respect the Queen Mother, like Queen Victoria, was represented as being like all women and yet unlike all women as they grow older. In the years following her bereavement in early middle age the Queen Mother consistently aged gracefully in the performance of her public duties. In this respect she can be said to have displayed the moral qualities associated with the western ideal of positive

ageing ([Hepworth 1995](#)). That is, she did not allow the infirmities and health problems which are normally with chronological ageing to prevent her from taking an active part in social life and maintaining a consistent presentation of self to a public audience.

1.3

This consideration was highlighted in the [Daily Mail](#) report on Tuesday April 2, 2002 of the 'anger' expressed by the Royal family over aspects of two BBC interviews following the Queen Mother's death. According to the Comment column in this issue the crux of the matter was that 'some BBC presenters gracelessly referred to the Queen Mother as an "old woman" and even suggested that she might have "outlived her time...and didn't have much to contribute."' (12). In critical response it was made clear that the Queen Mother was an exceptional woman both in terms of her leading membership of the royal family and her exceptional personal qualities. In the words chosen by Prince Charles for his personal tribute: the Queen Mother 'had become an institution in her own right; a presence in the nation and in other realms and territories beyond these shores.' (*Daily Mail*: 5). In addition to her exemplary performance of the roles of wife, mother, widow, and 'a magical grandmother', she was described as a strong individual character who possessed a special understanding of the 'British character'.

1.4

In tributes from other sources the domestic qualities of the Queen Mother were symbolically extended with reference to her consistent performances in public life beyond the private sphere of the royal family into the heart of the British nation and overseas. Over the years she had become an embodiment of an idealised national identity which ageing had failed to diminish. Her faithfulness to the memory of her husband King George VI who died in 1952 was regarded as additionally praiseworthy in an age perceived by some to be one of declining standards of marital responsibility. The private grief of her family was reflected (unexpectedly for some commentators) in the public sentiment evident amongst the long queues of those who waited for hours to file past her coffin in Westminster Hall. The quality of this reaction was interpreted not so much as a routinised and perfunctory ceremonial ritual but a genuine expression of identification with an array of national ideals. A public response which in turn was acknowledged by the Queen in her broadcast to the nation when she drew parallels between her personal bereavement and the sense of loss expressed by her subjects. This reflexive interplay between the institutional and ceremonial and the private and personal was further endorsed by the Queen when she referred to her own good fortune in benefiting from the support of a mother who had positively enjoyed a long and active life - an experience of ageing which many older people and their relations fervently wish to share.

1.5

As the Queen Mother grew older commentaries on her public appearances generally intimated some appreciation of the tenacity of resistance to the natural processes of ageing. In this respect the Queen Mother's appearances were ceremonial expressions of the strategies many older people adopt in everyday life to cope with the ageing body and maintain the integrity of the self as it is presented outside the privacy of the home to a wider public ([Hepworth 2000](#)). It may therefore be argued that in her formal representation of aspects of this common struggle, the Queen Mother united the salient everyday concerns of a large number of older people in a spirited display of a royal ageing: a public endorsement of the moral value associated with positive ageing as encountered in mundane social life.

1.6

In 1993 [Age Concern England](#) carried out a survey involving a sample of people from 11 to 65 years of age with due consideration of the variables of gender, ethnicity and region. This research discovered that the most popular older role model was the Queen Mother who was considered 'active and energetic, with a continuing zest for life. She is seen as independent, while maintaining a good relationship with her family. She is loved for her

kindness and humour and admired for her looks, knowledge and distinguished air.' ([1993: 8](#)). The key properties of a role model, says Alison Booth, combine 'sameness with difference' ([Booth 1997: 62](#)): a role model is firstly representative of a large group of people, and secondly and simultaneously an image of individual distinction. In essence a role model is relational; to command the interest and attention of an audience it is a communicative performance which comprises 'a relation among three figures: the target audience, the model, and the presenter or narrator' (1997: 62). The public response to the Queen Mother as the oldest active representative of the royal family and to her death suggest that an explanation of her popularity can be found in a practical realisation of these interactional properties of a role model.

Queen Victoria

2.1

Within the royal family the Queen Mother, like Queen Victoria, played a traditional feminine role. Her penetration into the layers of the social imagination and memory is articulated in terms of a gendered life stage imagery. Although the Queen Mother was never sovereign in her own right, she shares with Queen Victoria the performance of the difficult balancing act between feminine roles and monarchy. Throughout the entire century, as frequently reproduced photographs from the past are a reminder, she was publicised in a variety of conventional feminine roles: nurse during the First World War, bride of the Duke of York, supportive Queen to George VI and finally, for over fifty years - as long as many people can remember - Queen Mother. In his study of the death of Queen Victoria, Rennell notes that Queen Victoria was widely referred to as 'Mother' and in some newspapers as the 'Queen-Mother'. ([Rennell, 2001: 307](#), note 5) and [Weltman \(1997\)](#) notes that references to Victoria's multiple roles as "'Queen", "woman", "wife", "mother", "mother of her people"' occur frequently throughout her reign (121, nt 12)

2.2

Queen Victoria, these scholars argue, made enormous gains for the monarchy by conforming to mainstream nineteenth-century concepts of femininity. She helped sustain and reinforce the idea of constitutional monarchy. When she died in old age no-one could imagine the era in which she lived without her and saw her death as the beginning of the end of a way of life. For Homans Queen Victoria was an active agent in the production of the constitutional monarchy ([Homans 1998](#)) who actively contrived to produce a popular public image of a woman who was successively a devoted wife and mother, inconsolable widow, beloved grandmother, and simultaneously Queen and Empress.

2.3

Stimulated by Dorothy Thompson's sociological monograph on Queen Victoria, gender and power ([Thompson 1990](#)), a number of feminist scholars ([Homans 1998](#); [Homans and Munich 1997](#); [Munich 1996](#); [Watson 1997](#)) have made a valuable contribution to the sociological and cultural analysis of the interplay between gender and power which they see as central to explaining the popular acclaim of Queen Victoria's performance of her role as constitutional monarch. And this success also sheds light on the qualities of royal ageing as an expression of similarity and difference. In particular, Adrienne Munich's penetrating discussion of the cultural significance of Queen Victoria as menopausal woman ([Munich 1996](#)) and Nicola J. Watson's essay on mid-nineteenth century comparisons between images of Elizabeth I as an ageing Queen (ageing gracelessly through love of a younger man) to the advantage of Queen Victoria (ageing gracefully as respectable matron) shed light on the gendering of positive ageing. In her management of the conventional expectations surrounding respectable women of her time Queen Victoria maintained her position as a distinguished and powerful royal personage. And after her bereavement in 1861 the powerful public image she achieved as widow also influenced the public perception of the ageing process helping to foster a potent series of images of positive

ageing..

2.4

The contemporary perception of Queen Victoria's ageing was mediated by the belief she shared with her public that she was simultaneously every respectable woman and no other woman: 'a woman so unlike other women that it is remarkable that she is just like other women.' ([Booth 1997](#): 75) The dowdiness of her appearance (a characteristic not, of course, shared with the Queen Mother) was legendary ([Munich 1996](#)) and yet her performance of monarchy improved with age. A contemporary description of Queen Victoria in 1884 when she was aged 65 glossed over her stout body and euphemistically graced it with the word 'embonpoint' ('plumpness'), discerning in her demeanour 'the air of command natural to her lofty station', and a 'refinement of bearing that comes from high culture'. The furrows on her ageing face were the virtuous traces of 'affliction, experience and meditation...' or the physiognomic signs of 'strong character...high position...accustomed to great responsibilities.' ([Adams 1884](#), quoted in [Booth 1997](#): 73)

Queen Victoria and The Queen Mother

3.1

Although completely different in physical appearance and style of clothing, and separated by momentous social change, Queen Victoria and the Queen Mother can both claim exemplary performances of royal duties across the conventional 'ages' or 'stages' of the lifecourse. Arguably their shared characteristic was the integration of the conventional feminine status of woman, wife and mother with respectively that of monarch and Queen Mother and as they grew older these performances were distinguished by the royal management of positive ageing. As [Homans \(1998\)](#) shows Queen Victoria had successfully manipulated her gendered position as a housewife, widow and sovereign throughout her reign and ultimately became deeply identified in the social imagination with 'Victorian' culture. Whilst the Queen Mother does not completely correspond (her name has not (yet), for example, been given to an era or a culture), for some members of the public she has come to symbolise cherished values, which are also believed to be disappearing from the British way of life. These perceived values, which transcend the ageing process include dignity, loyalty, devotion to duty, self-discipline and style. After her widowhood in 1861 Queen Victoria came to embody the typification of a middle aged and older woman who could unusually combine bourgeois domestic virtues with the role of sovereign. Throughout her extended later life the Queen Mother's performance embodied the ideals of constitutional monarchy for which in return she was entitled to enjoy a lavish lifestyle. At the heart of the Queen Mother's positive ageing is the public visibility of her unceasing resolve to set aside the physical tribulations of later life in a determined round of public appearances where whatever discomfort she may have been experiencing was concealed from the admiring audience. In both cases Queen Victoria and the Queen Mother were not marginalized by their gendered domestic roles but maintained themselves as central figures in the frame.

3.2

Attitudes towards the later lives of Queen Victoria and the Queen Mother and the public response to their deaths shed light on the processes involved in the social construction of positive ageing. On one level, that of ideology, the dignity and respect considered appropriate to old age is the expression of a traditional value which should be experienced by members of all social classes: an expression of the reverence for individual identity and the value of the person to which all older people can claim to be entitled in any decent society. Yet on the level of the everyday experience of many older people it is an ideal which is by no means universally practised. As research shows, ageism or prejudice against both men and women simply because they are chronologically older is endemic in British society and influences the way they are treated ([Bytheway 1995](#)). Yet at the same

time not all people are treated disrespectfully; some retain their power to influence others and their right to exercise an independent way of life. In the context of an ageing population where access to the personal and material resources necessary to combat ageism are variably distributed it can be argued that the dignity and respect given to royal ageing may be regarded as a ceremonial tribute to the respect considered universally appropriate to old age.

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