

The Crown Season 4: And outside the palace?

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Season 4 of Peter Morgan’s biographical drama of the reign of Queen Elizabeth II, *The Crown*, launched recently on Netflix. The viewing figures—an estimated 29 million in Britain in its first week, 8 million more than Season 3—speak not just to its high profile and its subject matter. It has qualities that merit attention.

The drama, which will eventually span the period from Elizabeth’s wedding in 1947 to the present day, dramatises the inner life of the British ruling family. This has some dramatic interest and potential, even though the narrow focus ultimately creates problems.

The show is a prestige project, beautifully shot and boasting an excellent cast. The performance of Olivia Colman, who took over from Claire Foy as the older Elizabeth in Season 3, was not universally welcomed. But here she is a restrained and serious centrepiece, as Morgan shows tensions spiralling around the grooming of a next generation of royals for office.

The season has two main themes. The Windsors are struggling to find a relationship for Prince Charles (Josh O’Connor), who has been advised to abandon his association with Camilla Shand, now married as Camilla Parker Bowles (Emerald Fennell). The very young Lady Diana Spencer (Emma Corrin) seems the perfect fit, and their marriage unfolds as the heart of the season.

Externally, there is an attempt to portray relations between Elizabeth and the new prime minister, Margaret Thatcher (an impressive Gillian Anderson). But Morgan is far less successful when he looks outside the royal circle.

He uses the characters of Prince Philip (Tobias Menzies) and Princess Margaret (Helena Bonham Carter) as a sort of theatrical Chorus, offering editorial observation and comment on events as they unfold. The viewer may doubt that either individual was ever capable of such articulate perceptions, but Morgan makes the two fine performances an effective dramatic lynchpin.

Morgan’s sympathetic attempt to portray the monarchy’s inner life in human terms captures something of its corrosive impact on all concerned. He shows portions of the ugly reality. This comes across well in the portrayal of Prince Charles. His selfishness and overweening self-importance as heir to the throne make him convincingly unsympathetic. But he is depicted still as someone seeking personal happiness, while asking, legitimately, “What does one have to do to get some

kindness in this family?” His transition from someone with at least a modicum of idealism and human warmth in Season 3 to this stunted and somewhat loathsome representative of privilege by an inhuman institution is handled quite well.

Charles’ portrayal strengthens the season’s focus on his relationship with Diana. From a high aristocrat family, Diana is depicted as a naïf whose fantasy of marrying a prince comes true. But Charles, happier with Parker Bowles and angry at being upstaged by his glamorous young bride, coldly marginalises her.

Diana was a victim of the institution, but belonged to it nevertheless. Morgan gives Diana’s background a light touch, but we see her grandmother Lady Fermoy (Georgie Glen) offering harsh instruction in court etiquette. The real Fermoy, the Queen Mother’s lady-in-waiting, was even tougher. During Diana’s parents’ divorce, Fermoy testified against her own daughter to ensure Diana would be brought up by Earl Spencer.

The season ends with Philip, previously depicted as friendly and sympathetic towards Diana, rounding on her as her marriage breaks down irrevocably. “Everyone in this system is a lost, lonely, irrelevant outsider,” he spits out, apart from “the one person who matters.”

Margaret’s own preferred relationship was ended by family instruction, and she was forced into an unsuccessful marriage out of duty and responsibility to the crown. She, too, summarises the season by saying she had “submitted to something larger”—the survival of the royal family.

This kind of project could never provide the gloves-off demolition the monarchy richly deserves—it has, after all, cost \$260 million to date. Morgan’s portrayal is only a pale reflection of the sordid reality, but it still provides definite glimpses. Although supportive of the institution and its figurehead, Morgan is not afraid to express criticism or show the venality—a scene where Prince Edward (Angus Imrie) outlines what he expects to get out of his position is particularly sharp.

However, even this is too much for many within ruling circles, who can tolerate little criticism at all. The show has been denounced, often farcically, for alleged “slanders,” or for solecisms about 1980s’ restaurants and royal etiquette—even for showing Philip shooting grouse out of season. One royal biographer attacked Morgan for smearing Philip as cruel. Given the real prince’s notorious public racism and family links with

the Nazis, Morgan's hardnosed character is almost a whitewash.

Morgan reaches his limits in attempting to depict the season's other theme—the relationship between the queen and Thatcher. He is at his best when showing the fine gradations of difference within the ruling class, from monarch down through to the newly emerging financial oligarchy represented politically by Thatcher. When the Thatchers first visit Balmoral they find the royals patrician, boorish, rude and uncultured. This rings true, but comes from a couple hardly less shallow, narrow-minded, self-serving and philistine, and the series attempts the impossible—the eliciting of sympathy for the horror from Grantham.

The show starts to fall apart beyond that depiction, as Morgan's criticism can go no further. At best he sees only the possibility of cosmetic change and the reorientation of this institution, which he still portrays again and again as a viable and unifying element of the British nation-state.

The weakness comes out most clearly in his take on Thatcher and her government. There is almost no recognition at all of how reviled the Tory government was, or the explosiveness of class tensions in Britain during the 1980s.

Thatcher launched a brutal assault on all social gains won by the working class in the name of “rolling back” the “frontiers of the state.” The toll—financial, social, cultural—was devastating, and its impact felt deeply and widely. Yet the occasional references to the three million unemployed are usually expressions of concern that the rapidity of developments might be a little hard on the unsung masses below. Class conflict is seen as requiring a little more compassion from the ruling elites.

Elizabeth mounts an argument for a “moral economy” against Thatcher, confirming Morgan's only superficially critical approach. Only at one point, when we see a Tory moderate complaining that a beaten and useless Labour Party is gaining support through growing hostility to Thatcherism, is there even a suggestion of mounting social tensions. The year-long 1984-85 miners' strike does not feature—a significant and deliberate omission, given that the 1974 miners' strike was quite prominently featured in Season 3. The 1984 strike dominated British life for a year. Here it is seen in one passing shot of a protest banner.

Morgan spends more time on Thatcher's 1982 war against Argentina over the Malvinas/Falklands Islands. When cabinet colleagues warn of the dangers of an unpopular war, Thatcher echoes royal arguments about their own position by discussing the responsibility to protect British subjects.

Episode 4 ends with the Royal Navy task force being despatched to the South Atlantic. In Episode 5, Thatcher receives the victory parade. But of the war itself, Morgan has little to say and nothing of a critical character. We see Thatcher telling Elizabeth that there have been no casualties. In passing we hear a radio broadcast announcing the sinking of the

Argentine light cruiser *General Belgrano*. That is all. The viewer could be forgiven for not knowing the war resulted in some 900 deaths, or that 323 lives were lost when the *General Belgrano* was deliberately sunk outside of and sailing away from the UK's arbitrarily imposed exclusion zone.

Morgan focuses his view of Britain beyond Buckingham Palace/Downing Street in Episode 5, “Fagan”. It is poor stuff.

Decorator Michael Fagan (Tom Brooke) broke into Buckingham Palace on July 9, 1982 and made his way to the queen's personal bedroom. Elizabeth immediately called security, but here Morgan gives them an imagined conversation.

Alienated and unemployed, in poor mental health, Fagan, who has been shown signing on to unemployment benefit and living a chaotic personal life, is Morgan's chosen “everyman.”

Fagan has a mission—to tell the queen what is going on, “because you either don't know or don't care.” There is no state help because the “State's gone.” He is concerned that money can be found for an unpopular war despite this. Elizabeth says Britain will bounce back because it must. Fagan says he used to think that. The queen is clearly sympathetic to Fagan's plight. Morgan allows the working class no active role. Instead, a damaged individual turns to the nominal head of state for redress.

Similarly, when Elizabeth and Thatcher differ over sanctions against apartheid South Africa, Morgan's sympathies are with the queen's backing of the Commonwealth against Thatcher, as potentially enabling compassionate change.

Nevertheless, when Thatcher is deposed by a rebellion of her own ministers, Elizabeth chooses to award her the Order of Merit, given at the monarch's discretion. Elizabeth is also sympathetic to her former prime minister, apparently as they both had to deal with stuffy, grey-haired old men! Morgan proves to be as incapable of any sustained criticism of Thatcher as he is of Elizabeth. These weaknesses can only become more pronounced the closer we get to the present day.



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