“I think little Vicky is doing her country proud” – Gender, the Royal Family and Leadership in ITV’s Victoria

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Taneli Hiltunen
taneli.hiltunen1 [a] gmail.com
Doctoral Student
European and World History
University of Turku

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Queen Victoria (1819–1901) was one of the most significant rulers in British history, but ITV’s three series biopic drama Victoria *(2016–2019) is the first time her reign has been dramatised at such length and by a female screenwriter. The series created by Daisy Goodwin starts with Victoria becoming the monarch in 1837 and ends in 1851.*

By the close reading of key scenes, I will analyse how the series represents gender dynamic between Victoria and her male advisers, the royal family in a changing world, and the screen Victoria’s public leadership characterised by empathy. This will be done by utilising feminist film theory, especially the concept of female gaze.

The article takes into account both traditional “heritage drama” aspects like the visually opulent recreation of the Victorian royal world and hard-hitting depictions of societal problems such as poverty, slums and potato famine in Ireland.

Introduction

Queen Victoria's (1819–1901) reign (1837–1901) was the second longest in British history. Her name has become a symbol for a whole era[1]. During these decades, Britain was transformed from a predominantly rural, agricultural society into an urban, industrial one and rose to be the most powerful empire of its time. From railroads to extending voting rights, the British Isles and its peoples saw major social, political and scientific changes, some of which are touched upon in this overview. The era was also marked with extreme inequality, poverty and even starvation.

The Victorian period has been a popular milieu in British films and television series for much of the 20th and 21st centuries. Nevertheless, the golden age of the big and small screen Victorias is quite a recent phenomenon: Although, as a character, she has appeared in over a hundred film and television productions (Fielding 2016, 68), almost all biopics about her have been produced relatively recently, between 1997 and 2019. [2]

This article examines the British series *Victoria* (ITV, 2016–2019). It is the first time the reign of Queen Victoria has been dramatised at such length and by a female screenwriter. This lends added authenticity to the complex depiction of a young woman who has parallel public and private roles. *Victoria* is entertaining as fiction but also an insightful historical television show that chooses royal family life as one of its rarely depicted Victorian aspects.

Significant and well-written queen characters are not a novelty in television series, as attested by for example *The Six Wives of Henry VIII* (BBC, 1970), *Elizabeth R* (BBC, 1971), *The White Queen* (BBC, 2013) and *Wolf Hall* (BBC, 2015). So far, biopics about Victoria have received less academic attention than especially those about Elizabeth I and her ill-fated mother Anne Boleyn. The sheer volume of royal biopics set in the Tudor and Elizabethan eras and their continuing popularity among the audiences have undoubtedly influenced this trend [3], but roughly during the last two decades, the number of series, miniseries and films set in the Victorian and Edwardian eras – *Downton Abbey* (ITV, 2010–2016) being the most well-known internationally – has risen steadily and made those times a mainstay in British television culture.

Daisy Goodwin (b. 1961), the creator and primary screenwriter of *Victoria*, has managed to bring a notable amount of intimacy and personality into the visually opulent and sweeping story – much like the similarly themed *The Crown*'s (Netflix, 2016–2023) creator Peter Morgan (b. 1963). Victoria's womanhood and her dual role as a queen and mother are of crucial importance to the

series, and this lends the show some of its feminist undertone. Because the central male characters, especially Prince Consort Albert and prime ministers Lord Melbourne and Sir Robert Peel, are equally thoughtfully written, the gender dynamic[4] becomes one of the keys to understanding the show's vision of the early Victorian society. It also makes possible the contemplation of responsible leadership and the personal dynamic of power.

First, I will analyse the ways in which *Victoria* utilises its titular monarch's gender and how male characters balance the story's dynamic. At the same time, it is possible to sketch some outlines of the representation of the Victorian/British monarchy and society. Second, the limelight turns to the "screen"-Victoria's family and how the changing society outside palace walls is reflected in its conduct. Finally, I concentrate on how the series depicts Victoria's empathetic public leadership on pressing domestic and foreign affairs.

I am using close reading as my method in connection with feminist film theory[5] which can be applied to television series as well. By the close reading of key scenes I will analyse narrative nuances and put the show in a cultural context. The female gaze represents women as subjects having agency– showing emotion, intimacy and respect. [6] This approach can include male characters as well. The female gaze seeks to deconstruct patriarchal representations of women, but as Anneke Smelik points out, it needs to establish the female subject's subjectivity at the same time – what it means to be a woman (Smelik 2007, 494).

Victoria was scripted and shot while the Brexit debate was heating up and the first series premiered just a couple of weeks after the referendum results were in. Similarly, the show points to numerous real historical challenges and problems, like the devastating effects of the potato famine in Ireland and finds useful ways of making these issues personal to the screen Victoria.

Image 1. The ordinarily-dressed Victoria and Albert as the unplanned guests of a Scottish Highlander couple. A screenshot from Victoria Series 2 Blu-ray.

Television series and feature films tend to be made relatable to modern audiences through thematic choices that are at the same time regional and universal enough. Victoria as the most famous British monarch of the 19th century and *Doctor Who* alumnus (2012–2015) Jenna Coleman in the titular role practically guaranteed the selling of broadcasting rights widely abroad. It is also worth considering how the success of many women-led and written television series across the genre field – from police procedurals to medical dramas like *Call the Midwife* (BBC 2012)[7] – have strengthened the demand for shows with feminist tones.

Victoria is continuing the tried and tested British formula of traditional aesthetics and music score, subtly convincing acting and a limited number of episodes per series. The field is open for research, but so far most academic studies about big and small screen queens have dealt with Hollywood representations (see especially Ford & Mitchell 2009).

Victoria contains several elements that were brought into the spotlight and criticised during the late 1980s and 1990s heritage-film debate. These include fascination with the culture and values of a particular class, which shows itself especially in the painstakingly detailed period set decoration and costumes (an industry norm), and, to a certain extent, the transforming of the heritage of the upper classes into the national heritage (Monk 2002, 179). Thus it is possible to partly position *Victoria* as a period drama inside the well-established British "heritage industry" that stylises British history for present-day consumption (Cantrell & Hogg 2017, 213). [8]

The post-heritage framework is an equally useful tool with its concepts including self-consciousness and ambiguity (see Abbiss 2020). There is a recent trend in the form of period series depicting rural life from a tenant farmer and manual labourer's point of view, such as *The Village* (BBC, 2013–2014) and *The Mill* (Channel 4, 2013–2014). *Victoria*, too, finds convincing, socially conscious ways of working against depicting glamorous and idealised visions of Britain's past and people. The drama mainly revolves around the royal family and key politicians, but some of the royal household staff members are given distinctive personalities, and through their stories we get a wider and more polyphonic representation of the early and mid-Victorian societal realities.

A kind of "upstairs and downstairs" structure is reminiscent of *Downton Abbey*, but *Victoria* counterbalances its glossier moments, that could be read as nostalgia, with authentically harsh conditions many working class and destitute people were subjected to live in – be it poor housing, inadequate wages, cholera or food shortages. A fine example of this approach is Victoria's dresser Nancy Skerrett's (Nell Hudson) bitter cousin Eliza (Samantha Colley) who lives with her daughter in a slum and is dependent on Nancy's monetary help. The complexity of the era comes to life with much force, which only adds to the personal level of the drama.

A Female Monarch and Her Male Advisers

Befitting the feminist notions of the show, Victoria's capability of keeping her own mind comes through right from the beginning. As in the previous major adaptations – the miniseries *Victoria & Albert* (2001) and the feature film *The Young Victoria* (2009) – the opening episode has her openly defying Sir John Conroy and her own mother over the household matters and the choice of her regal name. When it comes to party politics – above which a monarch should stand – Victoria has a hard time navigating the treacherous waters of Westminster. Coming to trust her prime ministers helps her greatly.

Lord Melbourne (Rufus Sewell) of the Whig Party takes on a fatherly role and boosts Victoria's self-confidence with his emphatic outlook. Their more informal conversations are also memorable. In essence, Melbourne becomes a statesmanlike but accessible figure to the young queen. Thematically and in keeping with the focus of my article, this calls into mind the weekly talks in *The Crown* between Elizabeth II and Prime Minister Winston Churchill. Similarly, *Victoria* does not flirt much with a semi-romantic attachment, instead cultivating a deep friendship and a sense of loyalty

between Victoria and "Lord M", which makes his eventual resignation all the more shattering to Victoria.

To Victoria's luck, Melbourne's successor is Sir Robert Peel (Nigel Lindsay), a principled and pragmatic Tory, albeit taking long to gain her respect and trust. As entertainment, *Victoria* utilises the differences between the two prime minister's characters to build dramatic tension. Through Peel's dogged fight for his principles and for moral rectitude as well, *Victoria* continues to illustrate the changing nature of personal dynamics between the sovereign and each of the incumbent prime ministers – again not unlike *The Crown*. As in real history, it is Victoria's husband Prince Albert (Tom Hughes) who makes her see the "reserved, unfrivolous, unamusing" (Wilson 2019, 111) Peel's virtues – quite the opposite of Lord Melbourne.

Peel also finds an ally in Albert. The series weaves this aspect into its fabric by showing them supporting each other on political matters and developing a respectful rapport. For example, when the Corn Laws debate is overheating in the House of Commons, Albert shows up at the crowd gallery to offer moral support to Peel. The bold move, however, gives one of the numerous opposition MPs a chance to ridicule the close ties between Peel and the Prince Consort. (*Victoria*, Series 2, Episode 8)

Although the growing personal confidence of Queen Victoria offers a strong backbone to the show, one needs to address the character's initial insecurity. Carolyn Harris, a historian and royal commentator, has questioned both *Victoria*'s and *The Crown*'s way of framing their respective queens' first months and years on the throne:"[The shows' approaches] reflect 21st-century expectations about women in leadership positions. Contemporary audiences assume that a young woman in power—regardless of the era in which she rules—would necessarily be filled with self-doubt, and be forced to spend much of her time winning over sceptical men. […] A confident young queen embraced by her subjects is difficult for us to imagine." (Quarts 29.1.2017). In Harris's opinion, both shows largely gloss over the optimism with which people greeted their new queens. She puts this down to the structure of the narrative that seemingly proceeds from one crisis to another. (Ibid.)

In *Victoria*'s case, the solemn coronation is indeed directly juxtaposed with the tragedy of Lady Flora Hastings that happened almost a year later. While Victoria goes through the age-old ceremony, doctors are examining Lady Flora for a child, but the diagnosis is a deadly tumour

instead. The tragic affair leaves a shadow that hangs over the remainder of the opening episode – complete with Victoria asking for Lady Flora's forgiveness. Instead of giving that, she teaches her a lesson about not treating her subjects "like dolls" but acting like a queen with responsibility for them. This leads Victoria to conclude that "everything is ruined" and all is her fault. She struggles visibly to regain her composure (Image 2) while inspecting the royal regiments. (*Victoria*, Series 1, Episode 1) The sequence is an apt illustration of the pressures a young monarch might face.

Image 2. Victoria fighting back the tears as voices from the crowd shout "Shame on Her Majesty! What about Lady Flora?". A screenshot from Victoria Series 1 Blu-ray.

On a deeper level of character development, keeping the jubilant mood to a minimum helps building a marked contrast to some later episodes that find Victoria similarly reeling from personal and national problems yet finding enough courage to address her subjects. As Mandy Merck puts it, this demonstrates "the royal duality of symbolic performer and private person" (Merck 2016, 15), the two roles having their own but also overlapping and even conflicting demands.

There seems to be a thematic trend, as seasons one and two of *The Crown* are built around a young queen coming to terms with the changes in her private life and her new role as the head of the nation and Empire, while simultaneously showing the monarchy slowly but inevitably adapting itself to the changing, modernising world.

In *Victoria* – and in real history – this does not exclude looking into the past as well. One of the most symbolically pivotal public moments is the opulent ball and banquet which sees the court dress in 14th -century costumes – Victoria and Albert being Queen Philippa and Edward III (Image

3). (*Victoria*, Series 2, episode 3). Lucy Worsley connects the medieval imagery to the new rise of chivalry. While scandals and affairs had been commonplace during the reigns of the previous monarchs, now the ideal was to pursue the love of one pure, perfect woman. Nevertheless, it was for a woman to accept her inferior position in a family, and according to Lucy Worsley, Victoria's own views on the matter do not seem to have seriously contradicted this general opinion. (Worsley 2018, 161)

Symbolically, the ball mentioned above and its preparation provide an effective representation of this reality: Victoria surprises Albert by having a crown made for him. As the royal couple has solemnly walked past the bowing courtiers and curtseying ladies and sat on the thrones, Lady Wilhelmina Coke (Bebe Cave) observes: "Don't the Queen and Prince look magnificent, aunt? Like something out of Walter Scott." Fittingly, both Victoria and Albert were great admirers of Scott's novels, and scriptwriter Goodwin possibly intends the line as a homage to this aspect of their shared cultural interests.

Besides the socio-cultural themes, the episode places the costume ball against the backdrop of food shortages caused by the unpopular Corn Laws and the economic difficulties the silk weavers faced because of the silk being imported from the continent. Victoria tries to alleviate the situation by making the invitees order their dresses from Spitalfields. On the evening of the ball she seems to momentarily forget the common people who have gathered to demonstrate angrily at the palace gates. The violent sight clearly comes as a dreadful shock to the Queen, and a sense of shame is magnified by juxtaposing the grotesque shots of the guests gobbling oysters with those of the furious mob struggling with the armed guards. On the grand scale of things, the event becomes a public relations disaster – despite Victoria's good intentions. Next day she salvages what she can by deciding that the leftover food is to be distributed to the poor and hungry. (*Victoria*, Series 2, Episode 3) The said scenes unfold with a fair amount of self-consciousness and ambiguity.

Image 3. Albert as Edward III and Victoria as Queen Philippa at the court's medieval costume ball. A screenshot from Victoria Series 2 Blu-ray.

According to Steven Fielding, "screenwriters like to present Victoria and her successors as the heart of a heartless political world, the only figures within the constitution wanting to put the people's interests first" (Fielding 2016, 79). This does not do full justice to *Victoria*'s nuanced portrayals of elected politicians like Sir Robert Peel but certainly rings true to the series' title character. A further proof of this is the screen Victoria's handling of the 1848 Chartist rally approaching with a petition of all men having a right to vote as its first demand. Victoria sees the movement as a peaceful one and initially insists to allow the delivery of the charter. She, however, becomes concerned for her own and her family's safety and signs an order of deploying the troops to block the entrance through Westminster Bridge. Seeing armed soldiers there makes her change her mind again. She personally approaches the Duke of Wellington with the effect of him ordering the troops to stand aside. While at Osborne House, Victoria receives a report from the Duke that the petition was safely delivered, which makes her frustrated she was not there to witness it [9]. (*Victoria*, Series 3, Episode 2)

As an example of bringing international tensions to a personal level as well, Britain's balancing act of uneasy alliances with the continental "Great Powers" is illustrated by the negotiations with the King of France about the planned marriage of Queen Isabella of Spain. Prime Minister Peel warns Victoria that Louis Philippe (Vincent Regan) trusts no-one and is "a master of duplicity", but Victoria believes in "a real frankness between the monarchs" and makes a personal visit without

government representatives. Once in France, the two monarchs indeed seem to find a common rapport as the visit goes along. Victoria is clearly enchanted by the idyllic countryside scenery and conforms to the French makeup customs to gain the approval of the court. Albert, reeling from his father's death, disapproves of what he sees as libertine ways and makes this clear to Victoria in private. Having returned to London, they learn about Louis Philippe's betrayal: the king's son has become engaged with Queen Isabella – the very outcome Britain was hoping to avoid. (*Victoria*, Series 2, Episode 5) Neither the monarch nor the advisers are infallible, but trying their best to serve Britain's interests unites them regardless of their different personalities.

The Royal Family Reinvented

Daisy Goodwin has built *Victoria* on feminist themes, addressing them in a historical context but from a present-day viewpoint. In Victoria's case, being a queen, a woman and a mother constitutes a complex balancing act with significance between the family level to international affairs.

A striking feature of Victoria's public image is how rarely she is seen wearing a crown on state occasions, using a bonnet instead. According to Margaret Homans, this was one of Victoria's ways to present herself as a woman, not as a "king" in a woman's body. Both genuine and calculated "ordinariness" became a key to her popularity. (Homans 1998, 5, 55) This is evident in her other clothing as well: the dresses are beautiful in their relative simplicity but nothing like the rich garments she wears for the costume balls. Both kinds of scenes underline the link between the role of a dress and the formation of the public image of monarchy, as pointed out by Andrew Higson (Higson 2016, 347). Jenna Coleman's Victoria does not seek to enhance her stature and compensate for her diminutive height by donning extravagant clothes. She trusts in the soft power of providing moral leadership by putting herself among her people, not high above them. A queen who visits a cholera hospital and soldiers wounded in an ammunition explosion cuts an inspirational figure that could, indirectly, influence the show's audience's perception of the British monarchy itself.

While visiting Scotland, Victoria and Albert get lost and end up in a cottage of a Highlander couple. (Image 1) The scene is likely a homage to a similar one in the film *Mrs Brown* (John Madden, 1997). There is no record of such an occurrence, but the plot twist gives a chance to explore Victoria and Albert in interaction with their faraway subjects – albeit incognito, as their faces are yet to be

made iconic by the cheap copies of the portraits taken by their court photographers. (Homans 1998, 46, 57)

Victoria and Albert show keen interest in the ordinary life of their new chance acquaintances, and once they are back at Buckingham Palace, a warmly humorous thing occurs: Albert takes up frying fish for a private supper. For a fleeting moment the social distance between the royals and the subjects dissolves. (*Victoria*, Series 2, Episode 7) In a way, the whole episode feels like a fictional precursor to later real-life efforts by the royal couple (and family) to make themselves more relatable by cultivating a middle-class public image (Homans 1998).

Victoria is not represented as a completely unselfish ruler, as she craves for her people's adoration but has a hard time admitting it. Such character traits are useful when "desacralising an icon", to borrow a phrase used by Sabrina Alcorn Baron in connection with the many television incarnations of Elizabeth I (Baron 2015, 125).

The Queen's obvious companion and counterforce is Albert, but before *Victoria*, the only time his creativeness and partly forward-looking attitude has been given some real space in either big or small screen films has been an Anglo-American two-part television film *Victoria & Albert* (A&E/BBC, 2001), where Albert, for example, voices his criticism about the intention to condemn Edward Oxford – the first man to attempt to assassinate Victoria – to death.

In the series *Victoria*, Albert embraces new technological innovations, such as train transportation (Image 4), and Lady Lovelace's prototypical calculating machine, and when it comes to the famous Crystal Palace, he opts for an unconventional, gigantic glass structure. Above all, he wants to be useful to his new nation and finds ways to achieve that. Albert sees providing the palace servants with their own flushable toilet, public sanitation, and army reform based on personal merit rather than family background, as equally important matters of progress.

The scenes connected with the Crystal Palace project convey the effective nature of his working: he took a new task, saw it done as thoroughly and swiftly as possible, and moved on to the next. This way he ends up having a crucial role in both preserving and transforming the monarchy. (Wilson 2019, 175) Obviously, such a drive for change was not greeted with unanimous approval, which Goodwin illustrates with the conservatives challenging Albert's appointment as the Chancellor of Cambridge University in 1847. When advocating for the broadening of the university syllabus [10],

the “screen”-Albert runs into stiff opposition from Cambridge University dons, some of whom oppose both his progressive stance and the fact of having a German-born Chancellor above them.

Image 4. Prime Minister Peel and Prince Albert are given a demonstration of how a locomotive works. A screenshot from Victoria Series 1 Blu-ray.

While previous films and miniseries have paid only some fleeting attention to the more acrimonious aspects of Victoria and Albert’s marriage, *Victoria* does not shy away from them. Series 1 is built upon a credibly written and acted, poignant love story, but by series 3, things have escalated as the royal couple rows loudly over how to bring up and educate their children.

Victoria’s attitude to her children has usually been interpreted as “bad” motherhood, controlling and even unloving – in essence displaying several views that are held as typically “Victorian”. Julia Baird has challenged this notion as a myth. She admits Victoria was “certainly harsh, judgmental and controlling” mother but counterbalances this with a keen and caring interest she showed especially in the 1840s and 1850s (Baird, The Guardian 9.1.2013), when she was in her twenties to thirties. Likewise, Goodwin’s script emphasises Victoria’s goodwill and loving, protective kindness towards her children and includes moments of joy for example when the family is seen together ice skating (*Victoria*, Christmas Special “Comfort and Joy”).

In the early 1850s, a dramatic conflict sets in, and the blissful existence gives way to a temporary frostiness. For Albert it is self-evident, according to the customs of the period, that in a family a husband knows what is for the best, but Victoria, being especially protective of the little Bertie,

protests against sending him to a boarding school. For a while, Victoria and Albert communicate with letters and only hold hands on public occasions just to keep up a semblance of harmony. (*Victoria*, Series 3, Episodes 3–5)

It is in connection with a spousal confrontation that Albert's ingenuity, as represented by the series, first comes to light. Observing a military parade in the episode "A Soldier's Daughter", he comes to ponder how impractical the cavalry uniforms, harking back to the Napoleonic Wars, are in field conditions. Victoria takes a more romantic view: "[B]ut so splendid. […] I think I would feel brave wearing it." As a practical character, Albert does not let the matter rest and starts to design a new kind of helmet. Victoria, however, does not share his enthusiasm as she feels sidelined from the military-political matters concerning the First Anglo-Afghan War. "I don't give a fig about your helmets" she snaps, going to the nursery ”where you think I belong". (*Victoria*, Series 2, Episode 1) A heated exchange like this aids to demonstrate the rivalry they had with each other in the early years of their marriage (see especially Gill 2010).

Gillian Gill has argued that both Victoria and Albert wanted to have their say in the matters of the state and the household. Behind the scenes, she allowed him to become the master of the house who controlled her finances and the education of their children, but in public Albert – a king in all but name – had to obediently play the part of a prince consort. (Gill 2010, 188–190) As Dennis Bingham emphasises, "[f]emale biopics play on tensions between a woman's public achievements and women's traditional orientation to home, marriage, and motherhood" (Bingham 2010, 213). Fleshing out the delicate, evolving balance produces some of the most effective dialogues between Victoria and Albert and serves as a multi-episodic dramatic arc, even when events of international importance become equally important driving forces for the overall narrative.

All things considered, *Victoria* paints a realistically complex and strained picture of the domestic family life of its titular character. Being a mother, a wife and a ruling queen all at once becomes at its worst an emotionally over-demanding balancing act.

Victoria's Empathetic Public Leadership

The public side of Victoria's life is characterised by palace receptions of notable personalities, costume balls and, most visibly, appearances before crowds. Generally, these situations form her most direct interaction with her subjects and show glimpses of the general mood from jubilancy to uneasiness and distrust in their facial expressions. *Victoria* conveys the eponymous monarch's

capability to appeal to people in demanding times. Speeches have been a staple especially in biopics about monarchs, soldiers and politicians, and the makers of *Victoria* acknowledge the evident power by making some of them an emotional peak scene towards which the episodes in question gravitate. Apart from the accession speech, the ones that stand out are connected with moments of crises.

In January 1842, during the First Anglo–Afghan War, the garrison troops lost Kabul to an uprising and were forced to make a hazardous winter retreat which ended in their annihilation in battle. The situation is embarrassing for Victoria because Albert has deliberately suppressed information from her about the dramatic turn of events. In the series, she rightfully vents her anger. There is thematically quite a similar, powerful scene in *The Crown*, as Elizabeth II scolds – in a formally cold manner – Prime Minister Winston Churchill for keeping her in the dark about his and Secretary of State Anthony Eden's respective, politically near-hazardous health problems. (*The Crown*, Season 1, Episode 7) These are no longer acts of an uncertain monarch but of a confident leader who values absolute trust and frankness in those closest to the Crown.

Victoria hears the eyewitness account of Doctor Brydon, the sole survivor of the catastrophic Kabul retreat, who conveys his own and other soldiers' sentimental attachment to their Queen. Touched by this, Victoria comes to a counter-intuitive conclusion: Instead of letting the nation "lick its wounds", as Prime Minister Robert Peel advises, she wants to remind it of a past victory that was preceded by the Kabul defeat. With the Duke of Wellington's backing, Victoria attends the commissioning of *HMS Trafalgar*. The following speech captures the themes of military superiority and heroic failure which were essential to the Victorian imperial culture (Barczewski 2016).

> *Today, this becomes my ship. It is called* Trafalgar *after a great victory when this country defeated a tyrant who threatened our very existence. We have our travails now. We have suffered a blow in Kabul; brave men have perished in the snows of the Khyber Pass. We mourn their loss. But as a soldier's daughter I know this nation has the greatest armed forces in the world. We will snatch victory from the jaws of defeat, and the spirit of Trafalgar burns as bright now as it has ever done.* (*Victoria*, Series 2, Episode 1)

Victoria also calls forth a reassuring sense of the past soldier generations watching over and inspiring the present one with their fighting spirit – a rhetorical device that has been in evidence in

Europe ever since antiquity (Lendon 2005). [11] The speech combines feminine sensitivity with martial confidence and gives the audience a queen who rises above her personal grievances.

Victoria's grand public relations victory at a moment of both national and personal distress is underlined by the present, approving and obviously admiring Duke of Wellington (Peter Bowles) as well as by his complimentary comment to Prime Minister Peel: "Nicely done, Ma'am, nicely done. You know, Peel, I think little Vicky is doing her country proud. They know their Queen is there when it counts." Albert, half-amazed and clearly impressed as well, gives an affectionate applause as well. (*Victoria*, Series 2, Episode 1)

Not only is the scene a powerful reminder of what a carefully placed speech can achieve, both as an oratorical moment and a dramatic element, both in reality and fiction, as in here, but it is also a rare occasion when any of the "big" (film) and "small" (television) "screen"-Victorias make a reference to the Duke of Kent, her late father. Without a father to guide her, she comes to rely on elder statesmen, and they return the favour by showing – most of the time – genuine respect.

Although *Victoria* does not give as in-depth a feel of politics and political culture as *The Crown* does, there is a thematic area where the series has much to say in the present-day context. British society has changed in many ways during the past two centuries, not to mention past decades, but certain challenges and problems, such as economic imbalance between classes, and religious tensions in Northern Ireland, have not vanished anywhere. The series comments implicitly on these matters as well.

The ever-topical question of Ireland takes the centre stage at dramatically crucial moments. The episode "Faith, Hope & Charity" made many British viewers for the first time acutely aware of the severity of the Irish potato famine, which is made clear by their very emotional reactions. Thousands of viewers tweeted their thoughts, and Daisy Goodwin herself shared their feelings: "The ignorance in UK if [sic] what happened in the Famine is shocking" (The Irish Examiner 3.10.2017).

The tragic chain of events was given its own episode in order to educate the Britons about one of the darkest moments in the shared Anglo-Irish past. Goodwin also had a personal reason to find out more, as she happens to be Dr Robert Traill's[12] great-great-great granddaughter. She told *The Times*: "I don't think that British people know anything about (the Famine). I would have included myself in that. I studied history in Cambridge but I never knew the extent of how and why it

happened." (Rogan, The Times 3.10.2017.) She also compared the attitude of the British government to the history of racism in America. (Cit. Lonergan, The Irish Post 3.10.2017) On Twitter, she added that "[V]ictoria is a drama but I hope it makes people more curious about the past" (Ibid.).

It is notable that Prime Minister Peel faced backlash for his pragmatic attempt – repealing the divisive Corn Laws – to handle the huge crisis with deadly consequences for approximately one million Irish (History Extra 2.7.2018). By showing this, *Victoria* has both the Queen and her closest politician standing as moral compasses against the destructive partisanship.

Scotland, too, has had its share of complications as a part of the United Kingdom. The Scottish National Party has many times been vocal about the possibility of a second referendum on independence. *Victoria* could be interpreted to make a statement on this in the form of the Duke of Atholl's (Denis Lawson) ambiguous, informal conversation point. Victoria is enjoying the breath-taking highland vistas on the roof of the Duke's Blair Castle in Perthshire, as he comes up and mentions the Jacobite rising of 1745. This reminds the Queen of how she "used to love the story of Bonnie Prince Charlie [13]" and told her nanny that she wanted to be a Jacobite. This kind of childhood nostalgia helps to explain the "screen" – and historical – Victoria's passion for Scotland, its culture and nature. The Duke, convinced of Victoria's benevolence, says: "My grandfather would turn in his grave to hear me say this, but since I've met you, Ma'am, I'm glad the Jacobites failed." (*Victoria*, Series 2, Episode 7).

The scene is not just about the Anglo-Scottish relationship complicated by numerous past wars and internal conflicts, but it is about tolerance, in general, as well. Atholl utters an ageless wisdom that has come to symbolise an ideal British sovereign: "A real monarch puts his or her country before their own inclination." (Ibid.) Religious tolerance is a part of this maxim, and the screen-Victoria displays her willingness to look past doctrinal differences by accepting Irish Catholics into her household staff (*Victoria*, Series 2, Episode 6). While many politicians and clergy members are shown to be indifferent, rigid and downright hostile towards the suffering "Fenians", Victoria displays her morality by taking an empathetic stance.

In the episode named "A Show of Unity", the Queen insists, in 1849, is making a visit to Ireland despite concern for her personal safety. Her objective is to try and alleviate the dissent between the Protestants and the Catholics, as well as make amends for the recent sufferings of the Irish.

She gives a moving speech in the spirit of the episode's title. To Victoria, the Queen's visit to Ireland – she apologises for its belatedness – is of a secondary importance to the great poignancy she feels in Cardinal Ronan bringing the Catholic faith to meet her own Protestant one. She wins the respect of the influential cardinal, and, with him, that of the initially reserved populace (Image 5). There clearly are no speedy remedies to long-standing troubles, but Victoria manages to make a positive impact by, yet again, proving to be the Queen of all her peoples; being there when she is needed. [14] (*Victoria*, Series 3, Episode 5)

The emotional significance of the visit is amplified by placing it right after an assassination attempt against Victoria – just as was done in the case of Scotland. The reasons for including these two journeys seem different, however: The Ireland scenes serve as a representation of an official visit with a religious-political pretext, whereas the Scottish Highlands offer the royal couple and their closest servants a moment's respite away from the public eye of London.

The complex interplay of the public and private life makes Victoria's leadership not distant but relatable to the modern audiences. *Victoria*'s positive message of different people finding common ground resonates on a European level and beyond. Scriptwriter Daisy Goodwin has shed light on this in an interview she gave for the BBC's *Today* programme as she painted Queen Victoria as a believer in a united Europe that is a "liberal, constitutional force for good" (BBC Today 4.9.2017). Perhaps the series *Victoria* could be interpreted as a warning and an attempt to alleviate the divisive moods of recent years through the meaningfully constructed historical fiction. The show offers a pro-European voice by showing what damage wilful division and nationalism can cause. It serves as a reminder of the importance of respecting political and religious differences and finding inclusive solutions to socio-economic and party-political problems which threaten to drive the different social groups further apart from one another – not to mention whole states.

Image 5. Victoria's shamrock-patterned diplomacy of faiths with Cardinal Ronan and the Irish populace. A screenshot from Series 3 Blu-ray.

Conclusion

As female-fronted and scripted biopics and television series are on the way of becoming a norm, it is intellectually stimulating to view and analyse a representation of royal life that balances the personal and emotional drama with the political context and vice versa.

Victoria keeps up an interesting gender dynamic between the female ruler and her male advisers by presenting both Victoria's reliance on personal support and her ability to make independent decisions. *Victoria* builds tension on the different personalities of Victoria and her prime ministers, and his spouse Albert shaping his own role, but the show does not sacrifice situation-specific nuances in favour of clear-cut generalisations.

In *Victoria*, the royal family's life in Buckingham Palace and Osborne House is a mixture of scenes ranging from almost ordinary happiness to sharp-worded rows over decision making. This brings a convincingly realistic shading to Victoria and Albert's marriage. Albert's active role in both domestic and societal matters is given much credit. In the middle of the opulent surroundings the show manages to convey a sense of middle-class image Victoria and Albert wanted for their family and the nation.

Finally, the show places importance on Victoria's public leadership, especially in times of crises. She gives effective speeches which have an inspiring and/or calming effect on the listeners. Victoria is also seen visiting wounded soldiers and a cholera hospital and inspecting London's newly-built sewer system. Her empathetic leadership and Albert's pragmatic, energetic activeness help adapting the monarchy to a changing world.

Victoria celebrates individuals who made a long-lasting difference to British society and culture, but it does not shy away from showing the flipside of the coin – inequality, slums, poor sanitation, starvation and imperial warfare. All the central characters are in some way affected by crises and injustices near and far. Daisy Goodwin and her script collaborators Ottilie Wilford and Guy Andrews display social conscience by including these aspects and making them an integral part of the story.

Given the cliffhanger ending of series 3 – exhausted and ill Albert collapsing on Victoria's arms (*Victoria*, Series 3, Episode 8) – it is unfortunate the show was effectively "axed" or put on an indefinite hiatus by ITV for the diminishing viewer numbers and Jenna Coleman's busy schedule. Daisy Goodwin was already pondering how to move the story forward in series 4. (Metro 12.3.2019) At this point it seems unlikely to materialise, which leaves a bittersweetness hanging over the achievements of the existing three series.

While the adherence to period authenticity in costumes and set design and the focus on royalty and nobility makes *Victoria* seem like a traditional "heritage" production, at the same time it takes its place among other socially ambitious British television dramas of the last two decades [15]. Instead of being "de-historicised", the early years of Victoria's reign are dramatised with complexity that builds upon real Victorian people, events and phenomena.

Victoria represents a society from the richest to the poorest who all had one symbolic thing in common: being ruled by a queen whose public and private persona continues to fascinate researchers, authors, filmmakers and television audiences in growing numbers.

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Notes

[1] Although the strict definition coincides with Victoria’s reign, the broadest one includes the years between about 1820 and the outbreak of the First World War in 1914.

[2] Two British biopics from the 1930s and a Romy Schneider-starring German comedy from 1954 are the only exceptions.

[3] The popularity of these films and series has in part been fed by the various depictions of royal sexuality. For an analysis of this aspect, see Betts 2019.

[4] By this I mean the balanced nature of the screenplay when it comes to female and male perspectives complementing each other, and, also, each character's ability and willingness to use power and mediation in relation to others.

[5] One of the classics of its field, Marjorie Rosen has interestingly noted how the very Victorian values for women, such as domesticity and innocence, had far-reaching effects on the content and messages of the early feature films. Marjorie Rosen, *Popcorn Venus: Women, Movies & the American Dream* (New York: Avon Books, 1973), 13–18.

[6] For an overview of the evolution and themes of feminist film theory, see e. g. Sue Thornham (ed.), *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 1999).

[7] See Fitzgerald 2015 for a gender and feminism-themed analysis of *Call the Midwife*.

[8] For a summary on British film and television heritage production, see Leggott and Taddeo 2015.

[9] The scene is a heavily fictionalised version of what really happened: Victoria was not present and did not order Wellington to allow the Chartists to enter – only a small number of the movement leaders delivered the charter. Julia Baird emphasises how the real Victoria was 'thrilled at the triumph of British lawfulness'. Baird 2016, 232.

[10] For a list compiled by Albert on subjects ranging from history to chemistry that offered very little or no teaching at all, see Wilson 2019, 178.

[11] The Victorians put a high societal and cultural value on rhetoric and took the ancient Greeks and Romans as their main role models. The Victorian way of writing and talking about soldiers combined a sense of innate patriotism with heroic deeds in service of the Empire. See MacDonald 1994, 80–111.

[12] An Irish clergyman and campaigner for Famine victims in Cork. The episode has a fictional scene where Traill presents his findings in person to the Queen who has invited him. Even though the show thus finds a way to bring the British and the Irish side of the catastrophe into personal

contact, the legacy of it all seems to be a conflicting one, as Goodwin realised: “I wanted to write an article about the Famine before this series went out but no newspaper was interested. I think there is a feeling of ‘yeah, Irish, whatever’. There is a fatigue about the relationship but it is not understood.” *The Times* 3.10.2017.

[13] See, for example, https://www.britannica.com/biography/Charles-Edward-the-Young-Pretender. Accessed 20.11.2024.

[14] In reality, Victoria’s stance on Ireland and the Irish kept changing from sympathy to anger and frustration, depending on the matter at hand. Baird 2016, 202.

[15] For an overview of the British television drama in the digital age since 2002, see Cooke 2015, 211–249.