

The Loss of a Queen

In the board game, chess, the loss of a queen is normally fatal. William Shaibel the caretaker at the Methuen Home for Girls, the abode of his chess pupil prodigy Beth Harmon in the popular mini-series, *The Queen's Gambit*, tells Beth, the first (and probably the last) time she loses her queen to him and wants to carry on playing, that she has lost and so it is only courteous to resign. Reluctantly she does. The queen, after all, is worth 9 points. The next most powerful piece, a rook, is only worth 5. Measly bishops and knights are worth 3. So, if you lose your queen, you're cooked. Well, maybe not. The Grandmaster, Aman Hambleton, likes to play games in which he sacrifices his queen and he still wins. But he is playing much weaker opponents and the gap between his skill and theirs is greater than a mere queen. But otherwise, you lose your queen and you're cooked.

Recently, of course, it might be said that we all lost a queen, Elizabeth the Second, who died on 8th September. But we have carried on playing. Well, you have no choice do you, whoever is lost? Unless of course, you are Romeo, hearing of Juliet's death, who wonders only how he shall then die : *Well, Juliet, I will lie with thee tonight. Let's see for means.* I am not sure that anyone killed themselves after hearing of Elizabeth's death, but the Samaritans were nevertheless alert to all possibilities, their website announcing they would listen to anyone who 'would like to reach out for support.'

For many, and I admit that I am one of these, the death of the queen seems a sort of nothing event. In Camus's *L'Etranger*, the anti-hero, Merseult, reacts to his mother's death with bored indifference, or what in French is called *anomie* : "Mother died today. Or maybe yesterday, I don't know." Merseult cares nothing for convention. He prefers honesty. He is not saddened greatly by the death of his mother. Why pretend otherwise? And for many, and I am one of

these, this is our feelings about the death of the Queen : ‘The Queen died on the 8th. Or maybe the 9th. I don’t know’.

For others though, for whom convention remains important, and who wish to say something, there will be a need for conventional language, with its unavoidable pretence. Chief Constable Simon Chesterman, for example, of the Civil Nuclear Constabulary no less, announced through the Gov.Uk website, ‘We are deeply saddened to hear of the death of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II this afternoon’. Perhaps this is true, although we suspect that it is not. For this form of words is pure convention and one does not need to be ‘deeply saddened’ to utter them. They are actually the words that one uses when one is not deeply saddened. If one *were* deeply saddened one actually might say nothing. One would be like the poet Yeats, who hearing of the death of his friend Major Robert Gregory, had thought of writing a poem that would be a suitable tribute but ‘a thought/Of that late death took all my heart for speech.’

We are more likely to believe Elizabeth’s son, the now King Charles III, who expressed his ‘profound sorrow’ at his mother’s death, in his first public address as King. And yet, as he delivered his address his profound sorrow was under very close control. This was not Theresa May’s sorrow at losing her position as Prime Minister and showing it in tears and broken speech. This was, rather, institutionalised reserve, a lifetime’s training in the compartmentalisation of feeling, a commitment to *convention* as profound as his professed sorrow. It was primarily a matter of doing what Elizabeth had always done and Charles was now intending to do: one’s *duty*.

The Queen’s life was widely praised as one of service and duty. Her *self*, whatever that was, was given up to service and duty. Publicly, then, there would be no self to observe, no person to identify with, only a figure performing their duty, maintaining their service. One recalls the various public speeches given at Christmas and on various occasions, masterpieces in their own way of considered reserve, of closely observed appropriateness. In her last Christmas address in

2021, reflecting on the death of her husband, she noted, 'But life, of course, consists of final partings as well as first meetings; and as much as I and my family miss him, I know he would want us to enjoy Christmas.' And no doubt the Queen would want us to enjoy Christmas, for all that life consists of final partings. We are *meant* not to grieve her too much. We are *meant* to forget her. We are *meant* only to say that we are *deeply saddened* by her passing, even if we are not, indeed *especially* if we are not. Especially if we are not, we should say that we are, for that would be for us a service, an enactment of some strange kind of duty. Our tribute to her should be in the end to be as fake as, in her utterly unique way, she was to us.