

Crown Jewels:

**A critical discourse analysis of political feminism in the
fourth season of Netflix's *The Crown***

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ABSTRACT

This research explores the complexities of three iconic 20th-century female British political and cultural figures through their portrayals in Netflix's *The Crown*. To achieve this goal, this research uses a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of the show's fourth season, which features all three women. Queen Elizabeth II, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, and Princess Diana are all depicted with great complexity, each using language to represent themselves, communicate their motivations, and exert their authority. By depicting female characters as complex and nuanced reflections of their real-life counterparts, *The Crown* effectively communicates to a 21st-century audience how these three figures ushered in progress for women on the global stage.

Keywords: political feminism, femininity, critical discourse analysis (CDA), Queen Elizabeth II, Margaret Thatcher, Princess Diana, The Crown

Iconic British women of the 20th century are ever-present fixtures of Netflix's multiple Emmy-winning television drama *The Crown* (Horton, 2021). From their poise, to their fashion, to their influence on global affairs, women like Queen Elizabeth II, former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, and Princess Diana captivated the world in the mid to late 1900s. Today they are portrayed expertly on the small screen, once again sparking worldwide discourse amongst Netflix viewers.

Actions taken by these women continue to influence international politics and popular culture today. The purpose of this study is to examine the representations of these iconic women of British politics and culture in Netflix's *The Crown*. Through a political feminist lens, I analyzed season four, which features all three women.

By depicting female characters as complex and nuanced reflections of their real-life counterparts, *The Crown* effectively communicates to a 21st-century audience how these three figures ushered in progress for women on the global stage. Though none of the three women actively pursued progress for women's political issues, each successfully forged a new path for other women and furthered the ideals of political feminism, either through wielding formal power or obtaining informal cultural clout.

Before I begin my analysis, I will first offer background information on Netflix's *The Crown*. Then I will review the context from which these influential figures emerged in real life as well as how women have historically been portrayed in television.

Netflix's *The Crown*

The Crown is a Netflix television series that follows Queen Elizabeth II from her early adulthood through the modern era. The show debuted in 2016 and has won many accolades, including 21 Emmys and 62 Emmy nominations (*The Crown awards & nominations*, 2021). The

fourth season of *The Crown* was released November 15, 2020, and takes place from 1979 to 1990 (Blair, 2021). Season four showcases Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister of the United Kingdom and introduces Lady Diana Spencer, later Princess Diana, following her courtship and marriage to Prince Charles. Queen Elizabeth II remains central to the plot as sovereign.

Olivia Colman as Queen Elizabeth II

Olivia Colman is a well-known British actress, known for her roles in *Tyrannosaur*, *The Lobster*, and *The Favourite* among other shows and films. Many of her early roles were comedic, though she got her first big break in 2011 with *Tyrannosaur*, giving her an outlet to demonstrate her dramatic prowess (Foussianes, 2021). Though she has been a mainstay of British television for longer, she more recently entered American pop culture consciousness in 2018 portraying another British monarch, Queen Anne, in *The Favorite*, for which she won her first Academy Award (Foussianes, 2021). She has since been nominated for an Academy Award for her role in *The Father* and, in 2021, won the Emmy Award for Outstanding Lead Actress in a Drama Series for her portrayal of Queen Elizabeth II in *The Crown* (Foussianes, 2021; *The Crown awards & nominations*, 2021).

Colman depicts Queen Elizabeth II in seasons three and four of *The Crown*. Since the show takes place over the entirety of the queen's adult life, she was depicted by a different actress in the first two seasons, Claire Foy.

Queen Elizabeth II is not only the longest-ruling British monarch, she has ruled longer than any other female head of state in history, her reign nearing its 70th year (Ireland, 2017). She is one of only six undisputed English Queen Regnants (Gareth, 2020). Season four of *The Crown* takes place during a decade of the queen's midlife, having long become accustomed to her role

as monarch. Colman is clearly suited for the role, having previously succeeded in portraying leaders and other strong women.

Gillian Anderson as Margaret Thatcher

Gillian Anderson is a film, television, and theatre actress best known for her roles in *The X-Files*, *The Fall*, *The Last King of Scotland*, and *Sex Education* (Gillian Anderson, 2021).

Though she has demonstrated her versatility as an actress, Anderson often portrays commanding women, and her depiction of former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher provides another successful example (Hassan, 2021). She won both an Emmy and a Golden Globe Award for *The Crown* in 2021 (Gillian Anderson, 2021).

Margaret Thatcher was the United Kingdom's first woman prime minister and served in that role for 11 years (Margaret Thatcher Foundation, n.d.). During her premiership, Thatcher was a particularly polarizing figure, championing controversial policies and earning herself the moniker "Iron Lady" (Hassan, 2021). Though she broke a glass ceiling for women in Britain, she did not pursue women's issues during her tenure, more often supporting sweeping Conservative economic reforms (Hassan, 2021).

Emma Corrin as Princess Diana

Actress Emma Corrin is known best for her portrayal of Princess Diana on *The Crown*, which made her a breakout star (Cooke, 2021). She is introduced in episode one of the fourth season as a teenager who meets Prince Charles when he comes to Diana's home to pick up her older sister for a date. The season follows her courtship, engagement, and marriage to the prince and highlights her mental and emotional struggles as a member of the royal family, manifesting in an eating disorder.

Literature Review

Feminism in the United Kingdom

British feminism emerged in the late 1850s, establishing new ideals of independent English womanhood (Midgley, 2007). Trailblazers fought for British women's suffrage in the 1920s and 1930s, decades prior to Queen Elizabeth II's reign (Kean, 1994).

Since then, new feminist ideals have emerged. Different circumstances throughout the Western world have produced feminists with dissimilar goals and values (Gelb, 1989). White working- and middle-class feminists became advocates for equality in ways different from upper-class women (Midgley, 2007). Colonialism and imperial power have deeply impacted modern Western feminism (Midgley, 2007).

Political Feminism

Political feminism, broadly, is a philosophy that critiques the failures of current political systems to deliver gender equality, both in the systems themselves and through the policies those systems enact (McAfee & Howard, 2018). Political feminism seeks ends that maximize the equality of women in the public arena (Baehr, 2007). According to Iqbaldi & Ningish (2021), political feminism is a theory that describes women who can express and wield their will without fear of justifying themselves to the public.

Political feminism in the United Kingdom is unique, as compared with other similar Western nations (Gelb, 1989). In many ways, women in the United Kingdom have historically had different opportunities in the political realm than their counterparts in countries like the United States (Gelb, 1989).

Women in Television

Historically, female television characters tend to be younger and less often play as major a role in plotlines as their male counterparts (Elasmar et al., 1999). Women are often depicted through stereotypes in television and are often written to be more invested in domestic and personal issues than in improving their intelligence, confidence, and independence (Kaul & Sahni, 2010). Where more frequently depict main characters in work-related roles, bearing the heavier burden of the plot, women fill roles dealing only with interpersonal relationships involving family, romance, and friendship (Lauzen et al., 2008). Though these gender trends have begun to become more equal in recent years, which is largely attributed to the increase in female scriptwriters and directors, inequalities persist (Lauzen et al., 2008). This lack of equality reflects women's struggle to achieve equality across all areas of society, which is a main tenet of political feminism (Baehr, 2007). As more women are portrayed as main characters with depth and professional drive in television, more women viewers will see themselves reflected on the small screen, hopefully giving them confidence to pursue women's progress in the real world.

Research Questions

RQ1: How are Queen Elizabeth II, Margaret Thatcher, and Princess Diana depicted in *The Crown*?

RQ2: In what ways do these depictions reflect ideals of political feminism?

Method

Subject Selection

The subjects of this study include the following characters: Queen Elizabeth II, Margaret Thatcher, and Princess Diana. Though each of these women affected change upon her rise to power, they are exceedingly different from one another. All three live in the public eye over the

course of their storylines on *The Crown* and are subject to the worldwide scrutiny that comes with public life. Each of these women wields her power and femininity differently, leading to frequent clashes between them, specifically between the queen and the other two subjects of this study. These contrasts likely stem from their upbringing, having grown up in dissimilar circumstances and being part of different generations.

Not only do these characters' origins differ; their goals, political and otherwise, do not often intersect over the course of season four. This study seeks to discover how each woman is portrayed to go about achieving her goals in the public arena.

This study analyzes quotes and scenes where at least one of the three subjects is present or specifically referenced throughout the fourth season of *The Crown*. A critical discourse analysis is performed to identify and analyze themes observed through the subjects relating to political feminism.

Procedure

I watched season four of *The Crown* once without transcripts, noting general observations relating to the subject of this study. Then I retrieved transcripts for each episode of season four online and watched season four again, this time reading the transcripts alongside viewing the episodes. I took notes on relevant dialogue and highlighted relevant text in the episode transcripts to be revisited and analyzed after viewing. I also counted instances when subjects engaged in or were mentioned in conversations and noted the quality of the language within those conversations through a procedure adapted from Pafford & Matusitz (2017). Relevant dialogue was drawn from scenes where at least one of the three subjects was present or specifically referenced. I performed a critical discourse analysis of relevant dialogue to identify and analyze themes through the lens of political feminism.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

According to Pafford & Matusitz (2017), CDA is derived from “discourse studies, feminist post-structuralism and critical linguistics” (p. 276). Due to its roots in feminist post-structuralism, this technique lends itself to use alongside a political feminist lens in the modern era, which is why CDA was selected for use in this study.

CDA is a technique used to evaluate language in the social sciences (Rogers et al., 2005). Conducting a CDA on a medium such as television reveals the intent of those who created, performed in, or produced the show through bringing to light what was left unsaid within the show’s script (Fairclough, 1998). Relationships, beliefs, power, and authority are revealed through dialogue, not only through what is plainly said, but also what is not.

Data Analysis

I used a total of 11 categories to collect data on relevant occurrences (see Table 1). These categories were grouped into five themes to make better sense of the subjects’ conversations, language content, mentions by other characters, displays of traditional or disruptive femininity, and displays of authoritative nonverbal actions.

Conversations

As was the case with all the subjects, Queen Elizabeth II participated in more conversations with men than other women, though not to an overwhelming degree. She was depicted speaking with large groups, often sharing meals or social time with her immediate and extended family, which included mixed company, or conducting meetings with her many advisors and staff, the vast majority of whom were men. Some of her conversations with men were one-on-one. Especially frequent were those with her husband Phillip or her personal

Table 1. Eleven measures to determine tendencies of subjects' character portrayals.

	Conversations				Mentions				Content				Displays of femininity				Nonverbal authority																				
	Female-to-female conversations		Female-to-male conversations		Positive mentions by others		Negative mentions by others		Sexualized mentions		Authoritative language		Political language		Social language		Traditional femininity		Disruptive femininity		Authoritative nonverbal actions																
	Thatcher	Diana	QEII	Thatcher	Diana	Thatcher	Diana	QEII	Thatcher	Diana	Thatcher	Diana	QEII	Thatcher	Diana	Thatcher	Diana	QEII	Thatcher	Diana	Thatcher	Diana															
Episode 1	4	2	1	6	2	3	1	0	1	1	1	2	0	1	2	0	4	3	2	1	1	3	0	1	1	0											
Episode 2	5	5	3	5	6	4	0	0	4	3	5	1	0	0	1	3	1	1	5	1	6	6	4	1	2	3	1	4	1	1	3	0					
Episode 3	4	0	13	5	0	8	0	0	8	0	0	1	0	0	0	2	0	1	0	0	4	0	10	2	0	6	0	0	6	1	0	0	0				
Episode 4	3	3	0	9	7	0	1	0	0	3	3	0	0	0	2	3	0	1	2	0	8	4	0	7	4	0	3	3	1	0	0	0	0	0			
Episode 5	3	2	0	6	0	0	1	1	0	0	5	0	0	1	2	4	0	2	3	0	4	0	0	2	0	0	0	4	0	1	0	0	0	0			
Episode 6	5	0	7	3	0	11	1	0	9	0	0	4	1	0	1	1	0	1	0	0	5	0	6	1	0	6	1	0	9	0	0	0	0	0	0		
Episode 7	4	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	4	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	
Episode 8	2	2	0	9	6	0	2	0	0	2	1	0	0	0	6	4	0	4	4	0	3	2	0	1	2	0	3	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
Episode 9	2	0	1	5	0	5	0	0	1	1	0	3	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	4	0	3	1	1	0	5	0	0	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Episode 10	4	3	2	3	6	5	0	0	7	0	2	0	0	1	3	6	1	2	3	0	2	0	1	1	2	3	1	3	2	1	3	2	0	0	0	0	0
Total	36	17	27	52	27	36	6	1	30	7	17	15	1	1	6	22	22	5	12	19	1	44	15	26	19	11	26	9	20	9	23	6	4	0	0	0	

secretary. Many of her female-to-female conversations were one-on-one, like meetings with Margaret Thatcher, as her prime minister, or with her daughter Anne.

Margaret Thatcher had more on screen conversations with men than women throughout the season, though that can be attributed to her role as the prime minister. The vast majority of her colleagues were men. Many of her female-to-female conversations were those she shared with the queen.

Princess Diana participated in more conversations with men than other women, though she had a greater proportion of female-to-female conversations than the other two subjects of this study. As Diana prepared to become and then grew used to being part of the royal family, she was counseled frequently by other women. However, many of her social interactions took place with men or in mixed company.

Content

The quality of Elizabeth's conversations tended heavily toward social language. Oftentimes, if a conversation started on a political topic, she steered the conversation away from the heavy subject matter toward more social, lighter conversation, usually having to deal with relationships between others, namely family members. For example, in episode five, a troubled man vented to the queen about how Thatcher was destroying the country through her political policies. Rather than engage, Elizabeth told the man that political problems always work themselves out over time and then diverted the conversation toward a lighthearted back-and-forth where she asked about the man's childhood and how he liked where he grew up.

Elizabeth used authoritative language significantly. She often used authoritative language to get the last word in a conversation, both in instances where she acted as the head of her family and others as the head of state of the United Kingdom.

As the United Kingdom's sovereign, Elizabeth was depicted as bound by norms and constitutional law, urging her to not get involved in politics and not express opinions on political matters or the performance of political officials. Even when Elizabeth did converse on political matters, she almost exclusively did so vaguely, staying well within the bounds of tradition. However, in the eighth episode, the queen broke from tradition and directed a staffer to leak that she was displeased with Thatcher and her resistance to imposing sanctions on South Africa amid apartheid, Elizabeth going so far as to be quoted as saying the prime minister was "unfeeling". The queen's public comments sparked uproar, leading her to recant and deny the leak, pushing her back within the bounds of norms and stifling further political language. Apart from this incident, Elizabeth's political language tended toward nonpartisan and informational rather than opinion-based.

Margaret Thatcher used authoritative, political, and social language significantly throughout the season. She demonstrated her position and power through her speech, unafraid to share her often extreme political opinions, bolstered by the support of her party. She often spoke with command and an air of finality, assured that her stances were undoubtedly correct. This was especially evident in episode five when she gave speeches updating the public on the progress of the war against Argentinian occupiers. She was rarely shown agreeing to compromise on any matter.

Aligning with her role within the royal family and society as a whole, the vast majority of Princess Diana's language was socially related, rather than political or authoritative. Her conversations revolved around her romantic relationships, her relationships with her children, and her place within the royal family. Diana was depicted as feeling free to express her emotions through speech to other members of the royal family. This was evident in episode six when she

opened up to Charles about the cracks forming within their marriage. At another point in the same episode, Diana used authoritative language to express her need to take care of her son herself rather than leave him for an extended period with a nanny. She only ever used authoritative language with regard to her children. She did not directly deal with political matters during the season.

Mentions

There were proportionate shares of positive and negative mentions of Queen Elizabeth II. Most positive mentions centered around respect for her and her role. Negative mentions were often levied by members of the queen's family. An Australian politician delivered the one sexual, objectifying mention of Elizabeth in the sixth episode, likening her to a pig who looks good in a twinset and pearls as he criticized her rule of the commonwealth.

When Margaret Thatcher was mentioned by other characters, it was almost always negative. As a political figure, this is common. Moreover, as the first woman to become Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, as well as a polarizing political outsider, such a high proportion of negative mentions likely reflected historical reality.

Thatcher was only sexually mentioned once during the season. In the fifth episode, Fagan, a downtrodden, chronically unemployed, and mentally-ill man who later broke into Buckingham Palace, accused a member of parliament of being influenced by sexual feelings for Thatcher and called her a "devil woman" unfit to be the prime minister.

Princess Diana received many different mentions from other characters, though more were positive than negative. As Prince Charles courted her, many characters within the royal family said positive things about her regarding her beauty, upbringing, and personality. Negative mentions were made mostly by Prince Charles, even before their wedding, as well as by other

women who were envious of Diana. Diana was sexualized and objectified several times throughout the season, though such mentions were relatively tame and often intended as compliments.

Femininity

Elizabeth displayed more traditional than disruptive femininity through her language and actions, though her performance was full of contradictions. In many ways, Elizabeth appeared traditionally feminine. She wore skirt suits and dresses, sweater sets and pearls. She often asked her family members about their days and about the other important people in their lives. She had many conversations with her husband, portraying a close-knit companionship. She did not often draw attention to her gender as it related to her official position. She did not explicitly push a feminist agenda, nor did she explicitly put down other women for their gender. Her personality came off as docile yet firm, caring yet aloof. It was almost as if she carefully curated a shell, aiming to appear traditionally feminine, though it was merely armor to protect her internal coldness and authority. Her feminine mask made her palatable to the outside world, enough that she would not be widely seen as disruptively feminist while, at the same time, allowing her to quietly wield authority, formal and informal.

Though Elizabeth tended toward traditional femininity, there were several instances where she was more disruptive, or at least nontraditional. Traditionally, women are thought of as nurturing and emotional. Elizabeth dotes on her dogs and horses but is often depicted as cold and emotionally unaffected by other people, especially when it comes to her children. Elizabeth's arc in the fourth episode revolves around her pursuit of discovering which of her children is her favorite because, early in the episode, she cannot identify which is her favorite when speaking with her husband, Phillip. She decides to meet with each of her children individually to ask about

their lives and discern her favorite. This methodological approach to mothering positions Elizabeth far from a traditional warm, maternal figure.

Margaret Thatcher was full of contradictions with regard to femininity. She was consistently depicted as being disruptively feminine. Thatcher was a well-known female politician, which was itself outside the norm. She was part of the Conservative party, a group resistant to change and progress and not a welcoming community for a driven woman. She lacked the gentility of the elite and was depicted as having little experience with the social delicacies of elite society, which was put on display in the second episode during her visit to Balmoral Castle. Thatcher was out of her depth, not knowing the appropriate times for tea versus dinner and not having brought the right clothes for hunting and other outdoor activities. She proudly boasted of her working-class upbringing, attributing her inner strength and determination to her father.

Though Thatcher was depicted as herself disruptive, she often performed traditionally feminine. She was shown cooking meals for her family in her home several times over the course of the season, once even while hosting several advisors and discussing foreign relations as she added ingredients to her sauté pan in episode eight.

Moreover, Thatcher often criticized other women for their gender. In episode four, she remarked on her frustration with her mother while growing up, that Thatcher could not put up with how weak and complacent her mother was with being a housewife and nothing more. Though Thatcher said she did not attribute her mother's weakness to her gender, it was made clear through her repeated criticisms of other women, how controlled they were by their emotions, that she saw herself as apart from the collective community of women and that she saw herself better reflected in men.

A few times, Thatcher criticized what she saw as her own emotional weakness, brought about by being a woman. When her son went missing in the fourth episode, Thatcher cried in the queen's parlor and said she worried that it must have been the first time a prime minister had done so and noting it would, of course, be with a woman prime minister. The queen assured her it was not the first time a prime minister had cried in front of her during one of their meetings. Later in the season when other members of parliament began calling for her removal as prime minister, Thatcher was shown to hold in her emotions publicly as best as she could but lose it once she retreated to a private place. In one instance, she closed the door to her bedroom and broke down immediately. In another instance, her public façade slipped once she got in her car, and a news camera captured her features beginning to quiver.

Princess Diana displayed roughly equal parts traditional and disruptive femininity throughout the season. She was seen as beautiful and charming, dressing and speaking publicly in a steady yet demure sort of way. She prioritized spending time with her children, not wanting them to be raised by nannies while she was swept away to fulfill official royal duties. The royal family was taken with her during her courtship with Prince Charles, often speaking about her positively and making clear to the prince that they thought he should marry her.

Though she superficially displayed significant amounts of traditional femininity, her femininity manifested disruptively at times. Since she wanted so badly to be a constant presence in her children's lives, she fought more than was ladylike to do so, calling the prince and his advisors' judgment into question. Her charming demeanor shone during her tours abroad on behalf of the royal family, often outshining other royals, especially Prince Charles who felt envious and belittled by her widespread popularity. Through her words and actions, Diana's free spirit was evident, stifled within the royal family and her strained relationship with Charles. She

developed an eating disorder to cope, unable to comfortably live a life as a meek spouse to a future king.

Nonverbal Authority

Queen Elizabeth II did not often take authoritative action nonverbally. Such instances were more reflections of her formal status as head of state or her family. The queen often received bows from her family and social guests, as well as salutes from military officials. Subtler nonverbal authority cues included where she chose to sit in a room for an informal meeting and having people come to her, rather than her to them, for one-on-one meetings.

Margaret Thatcher rarely displayed nonverbal authority, instead opting to use language directly. She ascended the political ladder through expressing her beliefs verbally and effectively. Having had to work to achieve formal authority rather than having been granted it as a matter of course, it seemed natural that she tended toward authoritative and political language over nonverbal cues.

Princess Diana was not portrayed to exert nonverbal authority during season four. Her body language tended toward submissiveness, and if she did exert authority, she did not appear to have qualms doing so verbally.

Discussion

In *The Crown*, the subjects were all portrayed with immense complexity. Each displayed contradictions rather than consistency, likely true to the real-life women they depicted. Queen Elizabeth II was concerned with the relationships within her family as well as the good of the British Commonwealth, though she lacked the warmth of someone so concerned with social matters. Margaret Thatcher was a trailblazer among women in British politics, though she continued to prioritize homemaking and had no interest in advancing women's issues and often

put down women as a class. Princess Diana was a devoted mother and captivating feminine popular culture figure, though her spirit and success grew too great, threatening the people in her life, men and women alike.

According to Iqbaldi & Ningish (2021), political feminism is achieved not only through achieving victories for women's political issues, but also through improving women's ability to express and wield their will without fear or a need for justification. *The Crown* successfully showed how each of the three women wielded political and cultural influence in the public arena, thereby furthering the ideals of political feminism. Whether or not they actively sought progress on specific women's issues, all three aided women's advancement toward equality, which Baehr (2007) notes is an intrinsic goal of political feminism.

Conclusion

The Crown should be applauded for its portrayal of these three iconic female figures. Where many series would squelch character development and complexity to give more airtime to dramatic plotlines, the fourth season of *The Crown* took the time to reveal and reflect upon the nuances of these women's motivations, goals, and actions. None of these characters were shoehorned into two-dimensional archetypal caricatures of their namesakes. Too often, other series have done just that. Part of why *The Crown* has been so well-received can be attributed to the show's sophisticated handling of strong, powerful, political women who forged paths for today's women to walk. The show effectively depicts hardships these real-life women endured in a time when there were few chinks in society's patriarchal armor while emphasizing the success with which these women ushered in feminist progress.

Eyes have long been on the British royal family and political elite. In recent years, the family's drama has swept up popular culture of average citizens worldwide. Public interest in the

British royal family has translated to show viewership, making *The Crown* one of the most popular streaming shows (Mayberry, 2021). *The Crown*'s fourth season saw more viewers in its first ten days on air than Prince Charles and Princess Diana's actual wedding in 1981, which was a major television event (Cope, 2020). Within the five days following Oprah Winfrey's interview event with Prince Harry and Meghan Markle, it was viewed by at least 21 million U.S. households (Mayberry, 2021). Netflix saw a spike in *The Crown* viewership following this period (Mayberry, 2021).

With such high viewership, *The Crown* may influence current political and popular culture in ways yet to be seen. The show's impact on the world must be taken seriously, especially with regard to how it depicts its main players, politically and personally, on the small screen.

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