

THE REAL QUESTION

THE MONARCHY

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VOICEMAIL: Hi Casper, Vanessa, and the whole team. This is Katarina calling from the west of Germany. You asked about a tradition or institution that we still stick to, and I was immediately thinking about the Catholic church. I was raised Catholic. I have always found comfort in my faith which is why I studied theology and have become a teacher of religious education at a vocational college. Nevertheless, I have grown more and more critical of the Catholic church over the past years, due to all the horrible things that have been going on within the church and mainly also due to the fact that as a woman I cannot be ordained as a priestess in the Catholic church. Now, my little daughter is four months old, and my husband and I were thinking about whether to baptize her into the Catholic faith. We have decided to do so, even though my husband is even more critical than I am, and I think this is mainly due to the fact that believing in the Catholic church, believing in the faith, has always provided us with a community of likeminded people and has always given us um, a place for rituals, a place for the important events in our lives to be celebrated, it has given me a place to talk openly and deeply about spiritual matters, and I think that is what we want to give our daughter. We want to at least give her the chance to experience all that. This is our reason for sticking with this institution, even though we see it very very critical. So, I hope this is helpful, I love your podcast, guys, keep up the good work. Bye!

[theme music begins]

CASPER: I'm Casper ter Kuile.

VANESSA: And I'm Vanessa Zoltan.

C: And this is The Real Question.

[theme music continues, fades, ends]

C: Thanks to everyone who has recently signed up for our Patreon. Moira A, Pauline N, Robin, Kelsey, and Mary-Kat. And I can tell you, Mary-Kat is the Beyonce of that Dreamgirls compilation.

V: Oh, I think that it's um, a team of coders that saved the West. Thank you. We live in freedom because of your service.

C: I love that Vanessa, yes, we have the best code-breaker listeners in the world.

V: So, Casper, I was so moved by Katarina's voicemail. These institutions can be so dear to us, and we can just feel so betrayed by what they take with them when they betray us. What do you make of it?

C: Yeah, I totally empathize with Katarina, and especially – it's one of those situations where, as you learn more about the institution, you realize more and more how not just problematic, but like deeply wrong it is, or has been. And so, what do you do with that inheritance of being part of that tradition, or being part of that institution. That -- that's really relevant to me, because the question that I'm bringing today is: Is it okay for me to like the Monarchy? And I'm a little sheepish even saying that out loud, because like, in so many ways, obviously, it's so wrong [laughs]. I mean, it's absurd, like, actually absurd that we should

think that there's some group of people in a biological family who are like, lifted up above everyone else, and I am literally a subject of the Queen in England, right, like there is a legal power over me purely by the happenstance of birth. You know, in tradition, there was a sense of the divine right of kings, and it was of course kings and then queens, so we've got a whole gender angle to this which is so wrong. But the divine right essentially said that like, kings and queens were chosen by god to rule on god's behalf over the earthly dominion. There's just so many layers in which this is ridiculous. But, as a kid, I remember I would get the number of pennies as my age, as my weekly pocket money, so when I was eight years old, I got eight pennies, and when I was nine I got nine pennies, and then there was a giant leap when I turned ten because then you got fifty pennies. And I remember one of the first things that I bought was a ruler with the kings and queens of England as a kind of timeline along the ruler. So yes, you can measure both in inches and centimeters, but you can also track the history of England through its rulers. And that is always how I have thought about history, certainly for Europe. But really, like, that's how I've made sense of modern time, I guess. Is by thinking oh hang on, well that was Queen Anne, so this was the context that was happening then, or okay well that was during the Stuart period and so this is the context of what's happening, and we've got James the Second you know, being a messy so-and-so. And so, the kind of royal story, even more than the royal individuals, have given me a sense of context and given me a sense of time, especially for the place that I grew up in, and that I feel connected to. And I think, especially during the pandemic, I've been thinking a lot about what home means and where should I be, and I don't know, like, the monarchy makes me feel connected to England. It makes me feel connected to [pause] like, where I'm from and who I am in this very weird way, and so to get rid of the monarchy, although it makes absolute rational sense to me, I have this emotional connection to, in that it would be like getting rid of part of home. And I'm trying to figure out what to do about that.

V: Casper, can you tell us a little bit more about what's wrong with contemporary monarchy? I understand, right, like, divine right is really silly, and the idea of empire was horrible –

C: Right.

V: --but like, those both seem to be things of the past, so what in your opinion is wrong with like the current Elizabeth you know, Prince Harry [Casper laughs] monarchy.

C: Yeah, I mean, I would definitely say yes, some of those ideas are in the past, but the past travels with us. And if you get one of Britain's highest honors, right, if you are made an MBE, or an OBE, that's essentially kind of like a mini knighthood, right, and then you can be raised to be a knight or a dame. But those words stand for Member of the British Empire, or Order of the British Empire, and so that legacy of Imperialism and being masters of other people and like, all of that, really gross icky history, still is embedded in the kind of monarchical nobility system. That's one part. I mean, the very fact that one group of people is set apart from others to be better than, or somehow be risen above, I think just that's morally incoherent at this point in human history, if not always. But then there's also simple questions like, well why are we spending millions of dollars for these people to live in luxury? Why are we maintaining a class system that stratifies people? But honestly, the thing that really gets me is like, I don't think these people are happy. I pity people born into the royal family because your life is scrutinized not because you chose it, not because you're good at something and you've demonstrated that skill, it's literally cuz you're born into a family, and it breaks people. And there's a sort of national gawking, I mean global gawking, at what happens to them. And I think we've seen that up really close, both with the kind of fictionalized telling in The Crown, you know the recent TV series, but also with Harry and Meghan recently, and of course Diana before that. So it just feels like there's so many layers of

like, why are we doing this? And I think in Britain it's particularly awful because monarchy is such part of the British brand globally. Like, I have dual citizenship and in Holland we, too, have a monarchy. And sure, there are plenty of issues there, but like the queen will cycle around on her bicycle, I mean that's a little bit of a kind of you know folk story, but they are not set apart in the same way. Certainly not in terms of like this national story. In part because frankly they've not been around as long [laughing] and the castles aren't as pretty and all of that kind of thing, but it just feels like there's a particular awfulness to the British royal family because of the way in which it self-perpetuates in this prison for the people in it. And in this way of making, I guess other people feel less than? But that's the bit that I get confused about, because if you ask individual Brits, overwhelmingly there is still support for the institution of the monarchy. And it's not that people are stupid, or that they don't get those arguments against it. There's some sort of emotional pull of being connected to that story that I can't escape. I — I'm so part of that. Does that make sense? I know it's like a non-Brit that probably sounds very weird, but —

V: No, I totally get that, right, like there's a question of logic and then emotional connection. Right? And —

C: Hmm.

V: It's really hard, I feel like especially nowadays, the world is so fast paced, it's really hard to love anything uncritically. And yet, we have this desire to just let certain things remain pure in our hearts, right, it's like, can't I just have this? [laughs]

C: Yeah.

V: Nothing is pure, nothing is unscathed. And of course we wanna hold things to a really high standard. I obviously don't understand the depths of it, but like, I totally understand that idea — like can we not take that away from me? Please? Please? Not that! [both laugh] Casper, if I were to tell you, like, we wake up tomorrow and I'm like "oh did you hear, love, all of the monarchy was dethroned [Casper laughs] they have to take their money and leave the castle and just live off the millions of dollars that they already have." What would be missing from your life? Cuz I — I believe you that something would be missing. Can you just describe, like —

C: Hmm.

V: I would imagine that there would be sadness and grief.

C: I mean grief is probably a very big word.

V: SULKING?

C: [laughs] I think honestly -- d'you know what it is, this is actually interesting, I've lived a life where it's been the same monarch the whole time, right. Queen Elizabeth II has been on the throne since the fifties. And so there's this imagine of stability that is really embedded for me in this idea of monarchy. If I had lived in a different age, right, where every ten years we were having different monarchs and there's chaos around it. That would have such a different meaning to me. And I wonder, because she is probably not long for this world, she's an old woman.

V: Uh, she's gonna out-live us all.

C: [laughing] I mean, at the rate she's been going she's having a good innings. But you know, I wonder if I will feel the same way when Charles becomes king and who knows how long he'll stay, if he passes it on to William, like, who knows. I wonder if I will have this same sense of, I guess safety and security, or at least stability, in the imagine of royalty because every, you know, armistice day, there she is the Queen laying a wreath. Right? Like every Christmas there's the Christmas message which I love to hate, and like, I make fun of my dad for being like, nope, it's ten past three, we must watch the Christmas message with the Queen where there's you know a lovely little silver picture frame with the latest grandchild or great grandchild, and she says [queen voice] "Happy Christmas" you know [laughing] But that's what Christmas day is, and so yeah, I guess there's a known factor in all of this, and that might change when she's no longer the monarch. That's really interesting.

V: Yeah.

C: I mean, all of this relates so much to my first text, which, I like the fact [laughing] that I'm bringing a very modernist text for this very kind of like ancient question, I guess. Because I'm bringing Mrs Dalloway by Virginia Woolf, and I'd been reading Orlando for the first time, so I've been having a little bit of a Virginia Woolf summer, and I love reading Woolf for many reasons, but one of them is because she's such a quintessential English writer. Like, she takes me into the kind of British imagination very quickly, and you know she was a radical writer in the early twentieth century. She really broke tradition with form, and wrote in a way that can be described as kind of stream of consciousness. And in Mrs Dalloway, which is a book that takes you through one day. And you see from different peoples' perspectives on the street and in this building where Mrs Dalloway lives with her husband Richard, you kind of see into their thoughts, and yeah, how they're experiencing each and every moment. And the passage that I've chosen is from her husband Richard. From his perspective, as it were. And it's a longer paragraph but I'll focus on the last sentence or two.

TEXT: "As for Buckingham palace, like an old prima donna facing the audience all in white, you can't deny it a certain dignity, he considered, nor despise what does after all stand to millions of people, a little crowd was waiting at the gate to see the king drive out, for a symbol, absurd though it is. A child with a box of bricks could have done better, he thought, but" – [Casper commentary] and here's the sentence that I really wanna use – "He liked being ruled by the descendent of Horsa. He liked continuity and the sense of handing on the traditions of the past."

C: Now, he's referring to Horsa who was kind of legendary probably a figure who lived in the four hundreds, so you know more than fifteen hundred years ago, and assisted in the conquest of Britain. So it's kind of this idea of a long lineage of kings and queens that have passed down through generations. But I just really identified, both with this sense of like, he liked continuity and the sense of handing on the traditions of the past, which his exactly what Katarina was talking about in her voicemail as well. But he also acknowledges: absurd though it is. Right? Like that weird mix of we all know this is so stupid, like, it makes no sense. But I like the tradition. I like the continuity. And maybe the answer this text gives me is, like, okay, it's okay to like the monarchy, as long as you're acknowledging how absurd it is.

V: Can I ask a really dumb question based on my cursory knowledge of the monarchy, given to me mostly through films and musical theater?

C: Vanessa there are no dumb questions.

V: Okay. So, this set of royalty is not descended from Horsa.

C: Correct. [laughing]

V: Okay [also laughing] so I was like, he liked being ruled by the descendent of Horsa, and I'm like, but I thought that there was like the Tudors and then the whatevers, like, I thought that this got passed off from different families, so it's not, right?

C: Absolutely. No, you're a hundred percent right

V: [laughing] Okay.

C: After the Tudors come the Stuarts, and then you know later come the Hanoverians who are literally imported from Germany. There's always some way to kind of connect the dots but it is really absolutely not a single line of descendants. [Vanessa laughs] Um.

V: Okay. [both laughing] I was like, and didn't William the Conqueror come after this?

C: Exactly.

V: Thank you, so like, that seems absurd. So, he liked something that, like, isn't real.

C: A hundred percent. I mean, that's what I've loved about watching The Crown as the show, because it really illustrates, at least for Elizabeth's character and I think that's the tradition of the monarchy represented in a personal form in a way, it's not about the person. It's about the Crown. And what she means by that is it's really not that important that there is – so-and-so was the son or the daughter or the child of, you know, so-and-so. It's more that this crown has been passed on, except for of course a very bloody English civil war which happened in the seventeenth century which is a whole fascinating part of history where we like literally chopped the king's head off. And we're like: no, we're abolishing the monarchy, this is absurd. But then came back, kind of fifteen years later, to reinstall the monarchy because it created that stability after this time of tumult. So, all of which is to say, yes, it is absurd. Yes, it's a made-up narrative. Yes, these people are not even that closely related to each other. But nonetheless there is something that is given to the story of the nation, or the idea of the nation, by having this crown passed on. And I wanna say that the idea of a nation state is absurd.

V: Totally.

C: Right? Like, what is a border?

V: Yeah.

C: What is a national identity? Who gets to say that you can't move from one place to another, just because you don't have a passport or the right immigration papers? Like, on a philosophical moral standpoint, no borders! Absolutely!

V: Yeah.

C: And yet, at the same time, here I am feeling weepy when an old lady puts some plastic poppies next to a stone monument. Why? Can we escape this? Maybe that's my question, is like, am I forever gonna be trapped in this identity? Like, is Katarina gonna pass on the Catholic church even despite all its problems, and are we trapping ourselves in these institutions? Or do they give us something that's more

valuable, that's worth the absurdity. And—and the injustice honestly, that's so wrapped up in these institutions.

V: I mean, what's so interesting to me is that like, right, this idea of Horsa, is it's a folk tale. Right? Like, it's just mythology. Just as much as like, any other folktale about fairies, right? Or elves or –

C: Yeah.

V: --the Greek gods or – And I sort of love that England is like “Nope, we’re committed to the bit.” [Casper laughs] Like, this is a made-up story, but real people are gonna live in the house.

C: Yeah.

V: And like there's something [laughs] I don't know, there is something quite poetic about that. The question that I hear you asking is: if something is corrupt but it emotionally takes care of people --

C: Hmm.

V: --like, at what point is it too corrupt? Is it too awful? For the upsides.

C: Yeah. And that – I mean that's what I like about this text is that it is both taking this story seriously and pointing at its absurdity. But what you're asking is, more than that, which is, like, if people are getting hurt by it, is that enough?

V: Yeah, I mean, the example that I think of because it's so clear-cut for me is like, this is obviously at such a different scale, such a different – like, laughably different scale.

C: Yeah.

V: But I grew up loving and worshipping Michael Jackson, right –

C: Yeah.

V: Like, I grew up in the eighties. And like, his music was joy and like, American [laughs] and revolution, right, like –

C: Yeah.

V: It was really like, such a huge part of my family's identity and like, Thriller was an album we would all dance to. And now, when I hear one of his songs, like, played in a restaurant or something, I'm like –

C: Yeah, yeah.

V: How can we still play this? Like, it seems like such an easy cut to me. Of like –

C: Mhmm.

V: --take a scalpel around this thing and get it out.

C: Yeah.

V: Right? Like, it's a cancer. It makes me sad and mad whenever I hear it—

C: Mmm.

V: --and like I wish I could still dance to this, but I can't.

C: Mhmm.

V: And it sounds like the problem or one of the issues with the monarchy is that it's been around so long, you can't cut it out with a scalpel. It just has its tentacles everywhere. And like, if you pulled on that thread, there's fear that the whole sweater would fall apart.

C: That's such an interesting comparison. And I'm so with you on the Michael Jackson thing, by the way. Um, but it's interesting to me, both because it's an individual versus a system, right, the monarchy is such a – a much bigger puzzle. And again, that's what I love about The Crown is you see actually how powerless individual people within that system are, even as they want to change it, again, I look at Harry and Meghan more recently, right. But here's a further complication: which is that when I look at Elizabeth, particularly, who is Queen now, I don't warm to her as a person. But I have to respect the overwhelming sense of duty that she has exhibited, right? Like unlike Michael Jackson, who abused children, here is a woman who has sacrificed so much of her own happiness I think, to fulfill being this figurehead for people like me.

V: Yeah.

C: I don't wanna say it's like self-sacrifice –

V: Sure.

C: -- because of course she's led a wonderfully interesting life, but my god it's also boring to open a fifth garden center of the week and then a shopping mall and have small talk to people who are overwhelmed to meet you for the eight hundredth time, when all you wanna do is play with your dogs. And by the way, you're eighty-seven.

V: Yeah.

C: I respect her, I guess that's what I'm saying. Like, it's not an individual failing or an injustice committed by a person, like, I actually really admire her in that way.

V: Yeah.

C: Cuz I couldn't do it, I don't think.

V: Yeah. That is such an important distinction. I think that that's right.

C: But also, she is not every monarch, right? Like there's been plenty of monarchs who've been awful. And I'm sure there'll be more to come. Plus, just having one person being good in some way does not excuse a system that is harmful or unjust. So –

V: Right.

C: -- again I'm talking myself in – into [laughing] all sorts of rubber band concoctions and I don't know what to do.

V: Well, I think, let's look at this text one more time.

C: Yeah.

V: Because it's so important, right, like "he liked the continuity and the sense of handing on the traditions of the past."

C: Yeah.

V: Right? And like that is the part that you're like "Yes. Me too, Richard!"

C: Yes!

V: Like, that's real, right? Like, and we know that there are like, neurological benefits to that.

C: Yeah.

V: Kids raised with a strong sense of identity and story –

C: Yes!

V: -- are psychologically healthier, right?

C: Right, more resilient.

V: More resilient. So, defend this! This sounds nice to me. Continuity, traditions. [Casper laughs] I'm a Jew! Tradition is the next text from Fiddler on the Roof.

C: [still laughing] Oh my gosh, can we please do that one in a future episode? Ugh. Yeah, no, that's helpful Vanessa, because what Richard and – and what I like – is the continuity in that sense of handing on the traditions of the past. Which, by the way, can I share one of my favorite definitions of tradition?

V: Yes.

C: This is from Joan Chittister, a Benedictine nun. She says tradition is not the things that we pass on. It is the passing on of the things.

V: Hmm.

V: What it says, is it doesn't matter that it's a crown. It doesn't matter that it's a silly throne or a particular ceremony. What matters is that someone has inherited it from their ancestors and passed it on to you. And now you get to pass it on to the next thing. And I think that's why I feel hesitant about like, going in strong with like, let's abolish the monarchy. First of all, because I don't quite know – there isn't a perfect replacement, right? All different systems have their own challenges. But also, like, who am I to break this chain of tradition? But then who am I not to? And also like, obviously I have no decision-making powers [both laughing] I'm just like a random person who's actually left the country. So, sit down and shut up, Casper! [still laughing] And also, I'm -- my parents are from Holland! Like, I -- I'm not even that British! Like, it's so dumb! [still laughing]

V: I mean, the other thing, right, that I just have to say is like, continuity and a sense of handing on the traditions of the past can be beautiful.

C: Yeah.

V: And it can also be why you don't cancel slavery, why you don't abolish the police and prisons, right? Like –

C: Absolutely.

V: If we did everything for the sake of continuity and handing on traditions of the past, we'd live in a worse world than we do. Right? So –

C: Absolutely.

V: -- it's a tricky thing. And I do think that the British monarchy, to some extent, has transformed in a lot of ways and has gotten better in a lot of ways. But like, continuity for continuity's sake is – I know it's not something that you believe in.

C: Right! And – and that's where I really point to the deep unhappiness I think we've seen with some members of the royal family because they're stuck having to fulfill this continuity that doesn't make people happy. I mean – at least not the people in the family, right? I was so taken with the Meghan and Harry interview where he was basically saying, my family does not talk about these things. And I have wanted to talk about it. And they couldn't meet me there, and so we've left. And his journey is massively influenced because he had a partner who was like, hey, let me tell you about racism. [laughing] Like, hey, let's talk about gender. Let's talk about what it means to have you know mental health be taken seriously. Like, let's love one another and not be stuck in these prisons of performance, you know. Which is so much of what happens in that family. Because of this obsession with continuity. So, again, I'm totally with you. The thing that I'm wondering now is: the relationship between tradition and change. And I think about the difference between the Queen's response to the death of Diana, right, this famous moment where she misjudged the mood of the nation. Right? There was this outpouring of grief and love for the People's Princess, as she was called. I remember that day. And the Queen was silent. She was absent, right? Like she totally didn't get it. And then, compare that with the London Olympics in 2012. The opening ceremony where there's this, like, little bit between James Bond and the Queen, and they're jumping out of a helicopter, and like, parachuting into the stadium to start the Olympic games. Of course, it wasn't actually her, but there's someone jumping in the same, y'know, dress that she was wearing, and it looked like the Queen. She was in on the joke, right? Like, she got the mood of the nation. And she had clearly evolved, like, she had understood that she needed to change, that this stiff upper lip, cold remote figure was not what the country needed. And yeah, I guess that's maybe another angle in this quote, which connects to what you were saying that there's descendent of Horsa is totally imaginary. And I love that Woolf actually chooses a descendent that is not an obvious choice, right, usually William the Conqueror, or maybe a later king that we really can trace is a choice that's upheld but here is this mythical figure that Woolf takes us to. Maybe to point to that very absurdity.

V: I think it does two things: It points to his pretension [Casper laughs] and to his absurdity. Right? He's like, yeah, I know about Horsa, and then it's like, also that's not real. It's a brilliant choice that Woolf makes here.

C: [still laughing] Oh god, he really comes to life doesn't he, this character Richard. Yeah. [both laughing]

V: In this one sentence! She's a genius. [Casper laughs] Yeah, I – it's just, right, like, people who like continuity are often the people who are like why does it need to reform at all? Right?

C: Yeah. The other thing Vanessa is that it's – in my experience it's not just people like me, and by that I mean white people, people who I mean – like when I sound –

V: Yeah.

C: -- British in my English accent, I can really live into [laughing] that kind of posh English accent. Someone who is highly educated in England. Often it's new immigrants who are most passionate about the monarchy.

V: Yeah.

C: People who can use it as a bridge into belonging, into this new country by being massive fans of the Queen, or really passionate about its history. You know that might be a bit of a stereotype, but it's borne out in my experience, whether it's, you know, people newly arrived from Pakistan or from Nigeria, or from the Caribbean. And of course, many of those countries have a long and complicated history with Britain specifically, and are in this absurd institution of the Commonwealth, which is of course headed by the royal family. So, there's layers to that. But there's a sense that – who am I to say we don't need this institution, when actually, it's beloved by people who maybe need it much more than I do, in the sense of it being a badge of identity that can be [pause] important. I would say I wanna undercut that [laughing] as soon as I make that point though, which is I think that's very typical of a first generation immigrant experience, I think that changes very quickly as you move down generations, but yeah there is something of a story that can be used to build that bridge, and to membership into a national identity in a way.

V: Yeah, but England has other ways that you could join that membership, right? Like, Harry Potter. Peter Pan.

C: [laughing] Tea and scones.

V: Yes, exactly! Like, you don't need the royal family and you know, you could cut off that head and another head would grow in its place. And – I think that there are any number of other things that –

C: Yeah.

V: -- England could, you know, welcome its newly immigrated citizens with, that are far less complicated. And maybe it's not as good of a container though, these other things. Right?

C: Yeah.

V: The monarchy is such, like, the air you breathe, whereas like you have to read Peter Pan.

C: Hmm.

V: You don't have to do anything to know about the monarchy. You just exist and it's in every paper. And it's on the coins, right? [both laughing] Like, it's on the money! I just – yes, I'm compelled by that, and also I just think that, like, if the monarchy went away people would still find ways to be proud of England.

C: Yeah, there's something really important in that, Vanessa, that's helpful for me. Because it's essentially what we're pointing to is like, you can't just take it away. You have to add something instead.

V: Mhmm.

C: And to really understand, like, where does the monarchy show up? It's not just in this physical building of Buckingham Palace, right, like it's on the coins, it's in the calendar, right, these moments when we

encounter the royal family. These national celebrations like the royal wedding, which I'm embarrassed to say I freaking love the royal wedding. [laughs] Like, I sat down –

V: I did too. The fashion –

C: Adore!

V: Serena looked amazing.

C: Ugh! And what -- you know Kate and Wills walked into this amazing anthem called I Was Glad. Like, that's what I walked into our wedding to as well! And it was fabulous! And I wouldn't have known that if, you know, I hadn't watched the royal wedding. But all of which is to say that any job of abolishing the monarchy would also have to be a creative job of being like, okay so then what? Right? What is the story that we want? And maybe this is a good segue for the second text.

[Short music interlude]

C: So, the second text that I have is Hilary Mantel's third book in her trilogy about Thomas Cromwell called The Mirror and The Light. And it tells the story about this kind of assistant to King Henry the Eighth who becomes a really powerful reforming force in England around the church. And the third book is really about his downfall. And the kind of loss of power. And this passage is really reflecting on Cromwell's efforts to create the church of England, so to replace the Catholic church with a new State Church of which Henry is the head, and so he can kind of do what he wants when it comes to – to marriage in particular. And so the quote is this: "Can you make a new England? You can write a new story. You can write new texts and destroy the old ones, set the torn leaves of Duns Scotus sailing about the quadrangles, and place the Gospels in every church." And here's the exact line I wanna use. "You can write on England, but what was written before keeps showing through." So I really like this quote cuz I think there's two ways to read it. The first is this sense that okay whatever you build that's new, there's always gonna be the shadow, right, this long shadow or – or this kind of water that seeps through the cracks. And even if you abolish the monarchy, England's story for better or worse, for you know hundreds of years at this point, is so embedded in this frame that it will always be there. That the way we think about history, that the physical buildings all around us, are all of this is so steeped in this kind of royalist paradigm. But on the other hand, if we keep the monarchy, its you know, horrific bloodshed and inequality and colonialism and supremacy, is always gonna seep into whatever new conception of monarchy we come up with as well. Like, we can't escape that history, nor should we want to. And so, [laughs] like, in some ways I just end up feeling a little bit paralyzed, cuz I'm like, well, so what do we do? Because we can't escape the past.

V: I don't know if this is a fair comparison, but I feel like, you know, something that I was really interested in is, I was never invited to one of these weddings, so I feel like I can stay out of it, but you know there are these old plantations in the south –

C: Hmm.

V: --of the United States –

C: Yeah.

V: But I think that there was like a good faith effort, right, for people to be like let's make something beautiful out of this. Let's make it into wedding venues. And then there was this like – uhh, that's actually a really bad look. Right? Like –

C: Yeah.

V: That's not just a bad look, like, that's bad. That's disgusting, this is where people were exploited, and blood was shed, and people were separated from their children. Let's not do that.

C: Yeah.

V: And I feel like we're now in this moment of like, so what do we do with that space?

C: Yeah.

V: Because, what I think America realized is like you can't just plan weddings on it and make it pretty. Right? Like –

C: Yeah.

V: To Hilary Mantel's points, you know, what was written before is gonna keep showing through. And you can't pretend otherwise.

C: Yeah.

V: So I agree, like I feel like our country's also paralyzed in this like – so now what?

C: Mmm.

V: Right? And I don't really know what's happening with these spaces right now, but like they're not serving as plantations with enslaved people. And they're also not serving as wedding venues. Right? And so – is that the question that you're asking of the monarchy? Of like, it's not serving as the head of colonialism anymore, but it carries that history.

C: Hmm.

V: And it's not serving the people in it anymore, like, [laughs] you know they are not divinely chosen, and they are miserable [Casper laughs] so like what is it now?

C: Yeah that's such a good question. I mean, I guess this is why I love the voicemail so much, because Katarina was faced with this question of – do we baptize this child? Like, we have had this experience. We're more and more critical of it. And here is this new life. Do we put this story on to this child? Yes or no. [pause] God that's so interesting, I'm just suddenly thinking about how we baptize new generations with stories, like, we're the monarchy, if even if it's not religious, but of course in England it is religious because the head of the State is also the head of the national Church which is just a whole other layer of absurdity. So I'm, like, I feel like I was baptized with this story.

V: Yeah.

C: Um, when I was gosh I was maybe eight or nine I went for the youngest group of like the cub scouts which in the UK is called the Beavers, and I had to make a like, a promise, I had to do the scout's promise to love my country and serve my Queen. [laughs] And just the way in which I guess in America it's like

you know pledging obedience to the flag. Like, there's these ways in which people get kind of baptized into a national identity.

V: Yeah.

C: Over and over again, in fact. Mantel was pointing to the way in which history that is untold or that is suppressed seeps in to whatever is happening now. And the first thing that feels right to me is like, nothing should be suppressed in that way. Especially the history that is most painful to encounter, right? Like, we should not hide from the horrors of history. And the fact that like, colonialism is still alive and well. I mean, the commonwealth may be a family of nations, right, is the language that they use, but it's like, it's also [laughing] super icky! Like, why is the head of state for New Zealand or Barbados the Queen of England? That makes zero sense, to me at least. And so having a queen of England is one thing, but like, I feel like there's a confrontation with history that has to happen before we can even make a choice whether to keep it or to abolish it, is like, this story is still so incomplete before we know how it can end or continue in a way that's healthy. I guess that's what I'm taking from this quote, is like, don't try and hide it and it still seeps in, like, make space for it. Like, invite in that history. Yeah. Make it part of the full narrative. Don't try and whitewash it or – or sanitize it. And make it into a pretty flag. Like, cuz that – that's where it feels gross to me.

V: So Casper your question was about how you are allowed to feel about the monarchy.

C: Yeah.

V: So like what does this conclusion [Casper laughs] do. Cuz as you said, right, I don't think you're actually in charge of what happens to the monarchy. The world would probably be a better place if you were, I grant, [Casper still laughing] but what is this gonna do for how you feel about the monarchy? How you talk about the monarchy?

C: Wow. I feel maybe, not more confused than before, but my confusion is richer. It's so lovely honestly to have a chance to like think out loud about something like this. Because my loyalty or my investment in the tradition of the story is still really strong, because it's part of how I understand myself. I don't wanna disallow or disavow any future understanding of myself, cuz that has changed before. And the thing that I do feel much clearer on is [pause] I don't want to tell an uncomplicated story. I don't want to buy in, right, to this myth that we see in Woolf, that that character Richard Dalloway likes, this sense of continuity. And absurdity is not enough to counter that continuity, right? He's pointing to the silliness of it even though he loves it, and silliness is not honest enough, it's not true. And it doesn't ask enough of me, right? There has to be so much more uncovering of what this institution has stood for and protected and allowed. Not just atrocities frankly abroad but also domestically, right? Like, the ways in which the British class system has persisted all of these years, the way in which we have such inequality in Britain, as -- as elsewhere. Like, the monarchy upholds those systems because it suggests that some people are better than others or should have more than others. I guess I only want to allow myself the ease of falling into that story if I'm also, you know, kicking with both legs to make sure that I'm reading a people's history, if I'm understanding about, there's this book called the Blood Never Dried, which is about the impact of British Colonialism on different parts of the world, like, I and we as a kind of country have to keep honoring that history and trying to repair it as best we can. So I guess that's where I'm ending up, like, we only get the cookies if we [laughing] – like, of the pretty weddings and the lovely buildings and that story of continuity, if we're trying to make right for the wrongs of the past.

V: Are you gonna feel comfortable doing that? Are you gonna feel comfortable saying, we've been involved in imperialism for fifteen hundred years and we've created all this problem, and I still want it to continue? Is that something that you think you'll be like, yeah, I feel okay about that.

C: Honestly I think so because, the monarchy is not the source of the problem. Right?

V: Yeah.

C: Like, America is an imperialist country. It has a presidency. And so there- there's things underneath – yeah the monarchy is the coating or the story, it's not the source of the issue, right? The way we've structured our economies, the way we've structured race, those are the driving factors which the monarchy has protected. But a presidency can protect just as easily. So, I think I'm okay with it?

V: Yeah yeah yeah.

C: It – yeah.

V: Right, America has done so many atrocities and I am ashamed of all of it, and I like, don't think we should stop being America.

C: Right!

V: Yeah. I mean I think that, to your point earlier, I think all borders [laughing] should morally be abolished and whatever, but like –

C: Yeah.

V: -- I'm not gonna stand here and be like Vietnam, Afghanistan, you know –

C: Right.

V: --Cuba. Cancel America. Right? Like, that sounds right to me Casper. I think that you know, stepping forward first with the ugliness of the story, and then following with, and the monarchy gives me a sense of comfort.

C: Like, one of my greatest sadnesses about the -- the departure of Harry and Megan is like, imagine if, in ten fifteen years' time, right, as – as William became king, they led a process of reckoning? With England specifically, like, colonialist history. Of how racism and slavery and all of that came out of, to a large extent, like, Britain's global dominance. I just think that the value of symbols is so enormous but that – and they can be used for good, you know?

V: Yeah.

C: And the fact that clearly there's some sort of relational rift between the two brothers, at this point makes that very very unlikely, but there was an opportunity there, which was squandered. But an institution like the monarchy offers us institutions for people who otherwise wouldn't want to or wouldn't feel compelled by that kind of reckoning process, like, I think that's possible, and that's really beautiful to me. I – I hope – I hope that next generations of the royal family really take seriously what they can lead the country in doing.

V: Well Casper, thank you so much for this really, like, riveting and you know, important conversation.

C: I feel like I just spewed my thoughts everywhere and I – I – I feel like I landed on something that feels like solid ground, but I really appreciate you helping me think it through. Cuz it's something that's kind of dogged me for all my life, so I – I really appreciate it, Vanessa, thank you.

V: Thank you!

C: And, I'd also like to thank Virginia Woolf for writing the fabulous Mrs Dalloway, and in no way am I still resentful that Sean lost my copy that I had annotated on a train. And we'll move on swiftly. And also, Hilary Mantel. Um, for both of their fabulous fabulous writing.

V: I can't tell you, a dream of mine just came true. You just thanked me, Virginia Woolf, and Hillary Mantel [Casper laughs] all in a single breath. Yes! That is the company I keep! Thank you for finally noticing.

C: [still laughing] As you should. As you should.

V: And I would like to thank Ari for sending in this amazing maxim: Follow your anger. Find the place where your heart breaks. That is where your most demanding love is needed.

C: Ooh.

V: That feels really apropos for today.

C: Absolutely. Thank you, Ari!

[theme music begins]

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V: This week we'd like to thank Katarina for your voicemail, Julia Argy, Nicki Zoltan, Laura Glass, Emma Smith, Stephanie Paulsell, and all of our Patrons. Thanks so much everyone and we will talk to you next week.

C: Bye bye!

[theme music continues, fades, ends]