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### Royal Perfection

If you take a peek around my dorm room right now you might begin to realize the truth -- I am obsessed. And like so many of us, I can't stop.

Never mind the poster of the two of them next to my bed, my copy of "William and Kate: A Royal Love Story" that's lying on top of my dresser, or the DVD of their wedding sitting next to my TV. What's really creepy (and I can admit it) are the couple stacks of magazines piled on my desk -- all plastered with pictures of Prince William and his wife, Duchess Kate of Cambridge, on their covers. Checking out at the store, I cannot control my impulses: I buy any and every magazine that has Will and Kate's pictures or names on them. The earliest dates back to November 16th, 2010 when the couple first announced their engagement to the world in an exciting press conference at Buckingham Palace, which was televised worldwide. Keep shuffling through the piles and you can see the progression of a Royal Wedding forming, from decisions on the date and location to intense speculation on the dress Kate would wear, or the size of the wedding cake for their reception.

On April 29th, 2011, a foggy spring day in London, Prince William and Kate Middleton wed in front of 1,900 guests and over 38 million viewers across the globe (Hunt). I was one of those millions -- waking up at three in the morning to boil tea and eat store-bought scones as the coverage started, I watched eagerly as famous guests arrived, as Prince William shook the hand of the Archbishop of Canterbury, and as Kate finally stepped out onto the steps of Westminster Abbey in her elegant Alexander McQueen wedding dress.<sup>1</sup> I felt that their wedding, a deeply

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<sup>1</sup> Sarah Burton of Alexander McQueen fashion house collaborated and designed Duchess Kate's wedding dress under sworn secrecy. The hand sewn ivory lace gown, costing over £250,000 (roughly \$389,000).

personal experience, belonged in part not only to them, but to me -- I was there with them, crying tears of happiness as they walked down the aisle. Still, in all of the grandeur of the celebration, I couldn't help but wonder what the two of them were thinking. What was it like to hear the roaring cheers of millions of well-wishers waiting outside the church? Was it overwhelming? Was it exciting? Is this the wedding they really wanted, or would they have liked a more intimate gathering had they had the chance?

Even increasingly more now, as my latest People magazine captions the new arrival of Will and Kate's first child (Prince George Alexander Louis of Cambridge) with bold yellow letters enticing "Kate and Baby George: First Days Home," I stop to wonder how and *if* these royals ever actually have true control over their own privacy. All around the world, curious interlopers like myself want to know about the eight pound six ounce baby boy born on July 22nd, 2013 in St. Mary's Hospital in London (Bates). We pry incessantly into their lives, we want to know all of the details and the inside scoop on Kate's labor and delivery, but why? Why can't we leave these excited first-time parents alone? They, just like any other couple deserve to enjoy a bit of quiet time alone, I know. Yet I can't stop buying the magazines.

And so, I've become more and more curious about this overzealous fascination over the course of these last few years as almost every person who becomes aware of my infatuation asks the same thing: *Why? Where did all of this start?* To be honest, I never quite know. Every time I try to think about it, my mind goes blank. They're beautiful. They're caring. They're open. They're *real*. All I can say to those who ask, in my biased and distorted opinion, is "I don't know...They're just perfect." But really, I've come to realize that this is not true -- just like all of

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was kept a secret amidst immense gossip and speculation. The details of the dress were only formally released to the public as Kate stepped out onto the steps of Westminster Abbey prior to her wedding ceremony.

us, Will and Kate have made mistakes. So what has made these two, Britain's newest royal couple, so incredibly popular in recent times?

The first idea that comes to mind is freshness: Their youth, beauty, and the air of change surrounding them seem to be a welcome reprieve from the aging, traditional reputation of the British monarchy. Britain's ruling monarch, Queen Elizabeth, has reigned over the country for sixty-one years as of 2013 (Bates) and her son Prince Charles, at the age of 65, is one of the royals who has been in the center of the spotlight for numerous reasons throughout the entirety of his life. Much like that of his son, William, Charles enjoyed a sort of celebrity status in his youth during the 1970s and 80s. As a handsome young prince, Charles academic accomplishments (he was the first royal to receive a university degree [Sykes]), successful military career, and hugely popular marriage to William's mother, Princess Diana in 1981 boosted his popularity for a short time. However, approval ratings serve as a true representative of the decline of this monarch. In an unspecified poll collecting data on the Royal Family's approval ratings since 1981, it is reported that Charles' support has dropped from 50% in 1981 to a dismal 21% in 2012 (Skyes, 2012). Now at an all-time low, he has been repeatedly encouraged to abdicate once the throne is his.

His son however, has blossomed into the public's eye since his birth in 1982. William's approval rating in 2012 reached 62% -- the highest ranking of any royal family member within the last thirty years (Sykes). William's popularity has increased even through his wife Duchess Kate; who, according to a recent *Royal Central* study was named "Britain's favourite member of the Royal Family" with a 28% majority of votes (Royal Central). So the question is: *What has made these two so popular, unlike Prince Charles?*

As far as ratings seem to go, it feels like their youth and beauty seem to correlate to their popularity and celebrity status. Much like we see in today's culture, these two characteristics are celebrated and expected from the stars that grace our television screens and represent our country. Celebrities such as Heidi Montag<sup>2</sup> and Madonna<sup>3</sup>, who both have undergone noticeable operations to look younger and more beautiful, now serve as examples that the youth of our society see and might choose to idolize and live up to. In reading into the increasing popularity of these medical procedures, it is no surprise that plastic surgery has grown an exponential 700% in the past ten years (Rankman). As knowledge about and access to these operations have increased in our beauty-obsessed culture, the desire to obtain a more youthful look has become as easy as heading to the dermatologist's office and asking for a Botox injection. This common procedure, in which small, diluted amounts of toxins are injected into your skin causing short-term paralysis in certain muscles of the body, can be used on many different areas of skin, including underarms, cheeks, eyebrows, and most popular -- the forehead (MedicineNet). Doctors agree that this minimally invasive procedure, which can last four to six months, can help to reduce the aging wrinkles and lumps that naturally occur on our skin as we grow older, but the injections don't come cheap -- installments of Botox treatments add up quickly, and the national average price hovered around \$340 in 2012 (Wu). So what does it say about us then, that our culture encourages us to spend our money and look "young" in order to fit in with the millions of others who are spending 400 million dollars a year on cosmetic surgery? (Rankman) Beauty is beginning to be honored and valued over other non-physical qualities, and we want to emulate

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<sup>2</sup> Montag has reportedly had at least 10 plastic surgery procedures, including breast implants to increase her cup size to DDDs, liposuction on her stomach and thighs, butt implants, her ears pinned back, a chin reduction, a brow lift and a nose revision, among other things (Huffpost).

<sup>3</sup> While exact timing continues to be unknown to the public, Madonna has undergone numerous treatments in order to make her look younger, including "excess amount of face-freezing Botox injected into the frown line, forehead and around the eyes" for the past few decades (StyleList) as well as noticeable alterations to her teeth and nose, as well as tightening skin-surface treatments and procedures.

this. At the age of 31, both Will and Kate exemplify the messages that our culture bombards us with every day -- that to be young and beautiful is to be happy. Thus, it's fitting that Will and Kate, a youthful and attractive couple, have become a breath of fresh air for the British monarchy instead of their more traditional elders, Charles and Elizabeth. Their beauty is alluring to today's society, which catches the eyes of those all around the world because of the constant demand and desire to stay youthful and good-looking.

But I couldn't help but feel like it isn't just their attractive features that contribute to Will and Kate's popularity -- there is a much deeper connection that I, as I expect many others, feel towards the couple: They have had their fair share of embarrassments, successes, and regrets -- they are relatable in one way or another. Will grew up very much in the public's eye, but has always maintained a caring, adventurous demeanor whether it was during a vacation to Disney World at age ten, or during a luncheon with wounded war veterans. Kate, the first commoner to marry into the Royal Family in 350 years, grew up participating in Brownies, playing field hockey, and met William while studying art history at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland (Bates). She has been known for her thrifty shopping and the recycling of different outfits, but most of all, her genuine desire to be seen as normal. As author Christopher Andersen describes in his book, "William and Kate: A Royal Love Story," the couple shops, cooks, and lives together away from the media hub of London in Anglesey, Wales. The two love to take walks with their adorable cocker spaniel Lupo, and visit Kate's family on weekends. And even more recently, the couple has caused a great stir about refusing to hire a nanny to help with the arrival of their new son. Their attempts to maintain a sense of normalcy is refreshing.

Still, the two have gone through their moments of hardship as well -- notably their very public breakup in 2007 because of common struggles with commitment and fidelity.<sup>4</sup> Kate has dealt with multiple false speculations of pregnancy and a topless sunbathing scandal in September 2012, creating much tension between her, Will, and the media. But still, even if you cannot relate to these sorts of occurrences, it's easy to see the connection between yourself and them -- both make mistakes. In this extremely personal way we watch Will and Kate, a powerful celebrity couple, to validate our own experiences through their similar (and more public) hardships and to feel better about our lives.

We can validate our fears or worries through many different mediums, but most noticeably through our society's increasing devotion to reality television. In 2000, there were a reported 4 reality shows on primetime television, but that number has increased to over 320 in 2012 (Ocasio). One can find nearly any type of event or show that they are looking for to sooth their heavy conscience or relieve chronic worrying. Take for example, the show *Jersey Shore*. This mega-popular reality show following a group of New Jersey housemates during their summers on the Jersey Shore averaged 9 million viewers per episode at its height, lasting six seasons and creating stepping stones and spin-offs for its cast of eight (Ng). The premise was simple enough -- record these individuals living their everyday lives; gym, tan, laundry, party. So, what made the show so popular? To me, a dedicated reality television viewer, it was the delicious gossip, drunken fights, and scandalous hookups that occurred each week. Watching others do crazy, shocking things made me forget about my problems and focus on theirs.

Journalist Nicole McDermott explains this phenomenon, saying, "With reality TV comes a more interactive viewing experience," or essentially, we as an audience are able to interact what is

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<sup>4</sup> Will reportedly began to have commitment fears in July of 2007, spurring the breakup of him and Kate which lasted for several months. The two reported the time apart as essential to their reconciliation and realization that they wanted to remain together in the future.

happening on screen with our understandings of our own lives. By seeing housemate Snooki stumble drunkenly down the boardwalk and get arrested by the police, I can feel better about the miniscule things that have happened to me that day, such as failing a biology exam or forgetting an important meeting. The audience of reality shows can seek enjoyment and clarity in the way that everyone makes mistakes (some bigger than others). Our culture leads us to seek validation and acceptance in times of struggle, so just like *Jersey Shore*, the celebrity status of Will and Kate can serve as a reminder that it is not only the good occurrences that have happened in their lives, but also the difficult struggles that make Will and Kate seem so real, and so human. We want to see the similarities between ourselves and people like the royal family, so we attach ourselves to their successes and failures as a way to relate and enjoy life.

In examining these two different aspects to my obsession with Will and Kate, there was still one more piece of the story that I felt drawn to look at: *How was I introduced to these two at all?* Immediately, what came to mind when asking this was the internet. My first acknowledgement of the royal couple was a shady online article discussing the idea of their engagement, with a single picture of the two side by side in their white dress shirts outside St. Andrews. Smiling towards the camera they look young, playful, and in love as they wrap their arms around each other's waist -- I too fell in love. It was one of those moments where you feel connected, in some odd way, to strangers you have never met before (a weird feeling, I must admit). And from then on, I was hooked. News articles, magazines, books -- you name it, I bought it. Now looking back, it is amazing to think how easy it was and still is to obtain information about Will and Kate. Their lives as celebrities, henceforth open to the public, is extremely accessible to anyone interested. I find myself wondering what might be different had the monarchy maintained a wall of privacy in the personal lives of their family. What if there

were fewer online articles, and Kate's outfit wasn't a big headline to be read about worldwide? Would her topless pictures have blown up if Will and Kate were more private and inaccessible to the public?

In our increasingly public world of celebrity status and social media, the concept of privacy has become one which many fight to control and manipulate for their own means. Ultimately, being in control of one's own destiny calls into question the role that the private and the public play in our lives. Take for example, celebrities such as Kim Kardashian, whose claim to fame involved a very public sex tape of her and ex-boyfriend Ray J. In giving up a sense of control over an extremely personal moment, audiences became intrigued by the allure of a curvaceous woman with celebrity family members. Kim owes her fame and her lack of privacy to the public<sup>5</sup>, as without their support or interest, it is doubtful that she might be making the vast profits she has been. Further, "Keeping Up With the Kardashians," the hit reality show following Kim's largely public family, is openly honest about all their problems (be it marital issues, paternity doubts, or fertility struggles). Currently in its eighth season, the relinquishing of privacy has allowed the Kardashian brood to benefit from the role of the public eye through their heightened celebrity exposure and resources (Hartmann). It is the Kardashian family's *accessibility* that has allowed them to enjoy the fame and fortune that has followed. Much like Will and Kate, their openness is a key factor in their popularity and acceptance worldwide -- without it, they more than likely wouldn't be known and loved.

The rise of social media has led a revolution of increased accessibility to celebrities and news traveling across the globe. Through Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc., we in effect build and create our own character from the information we decide to provide or conceal. However, the balance between public and personal is much more difficult to maintain for celebrities such

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<sup>5</sup> As of 2013, CelebrityNetWorth.com estimates that Kim Kardashian is worth 40 million dollars.



as Will and Kate. What has kept me thinking about social media and the royal couple is the announcement that their son, Prince George's first baby pictures will be revealed over Twitter sometime in the immediate future (Arciero). After I finished squealing with joy, I couldn't help but give props to the new parents -- by announcing this event and medium, they were taking control of their own balance of privacy and accessibility. George's pictures will (hopefully) be revealed on their own time and at a moment that is comfortable for both Will and Kate. They have maintained their accessibility and honesty in times of both joy and frustration, a quality that keeps me even more captivated in their humbleness and reality.

I met a new co-worker today, and over lunch she found out about my Will and Kate fascination -- asking the same question I so often hear: *Why them?* I began to explain the different rationalizations I explored in this paper as I ate some cold pizza, but soon recognize that my rambling was of little interest to her and tried to change the subject. In investigating Will and Kate I have come to realize something that I don't want to face: I wish I could live their lives. To be young and beautiful, to be seen as approachable and honest, and to be famous -- my ideal self all wrapped into a single family. And I also recognize that this is not the full picture at all. Will and Kate face many difficulties because of their accessibility, public scrutiny, and appearances. Yet in my mind, I imagine a perfect world surrounding their relatable public persona -- the allure of having it all and living a happy life. So why do I love this royal couple so much? Sure, they're fresh, relatable, and accessible, but even more than that, they represent a part of me that I'm not ready to let go of yet -- a former vision of what life could be like had things been different. Society gives us these ideas of an "ideal" world through their skewed perceptions of beauty, honesty, and convenience, and we internalize these concepts as they become ingrained into our awareness of the world. It's all pretty messed up.

Just like Will and Kate themselves, my obsession is much more complex than I ever might have thought. And like so many others out there, I have fallen prey to the hypnotizing effects of the media and the images it sends us. So while I know I won't stop compulsively refreshing my Twitter feed until little Prince George's pictures are released, it feels good to have come to some sort of acceptance with *where* and *why* I might have this strong connection to the Royal Family. So while I probably will never get to be a princess, I can at least strive to create my own happy ending -- the same that I will always continue to wish for Will, Kate, and George.

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