

# **Beneath the Mourning Veil**

## **Mass-Observation and the Death of Diana**

### **Abstract**

This paper offers an introductory examination of the collective evidence offered by Mass-Observation correspondents of the extraordinary week following the death of Princess Diana. It challenges the underlying myth of the mourning and suggests that far from being 'united in grief', popular attitudes were in fact deeply divided across a variety of themes. Attitudes to Diana, gender, grief and mourning, nationalism and media coverage divided correspondents, both collectively and frequently individually. M-O's evidence suggests a more complex, nuanced, diverse and contradictory picture of popular attitude, that explains not only how and why some people mourned, but also why and how others did not mourn whilst others only partially did so. By illustrating this, the paper also seeks to turn traditional criticisms of M-O's 'representative' nature on their head. On the contrary, it argues that the very nature of its archive allows for a more representative picture of popular opinion during the Diana Event than either that offered at the time by the media and opinion polls or subsequently illuminated in academic accounts.

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The privacy of the Mass-Observation correspondents is protected by the allocation of a unique number.  
This is shown in square brackets after a quotation.

## 1 United in Grief?

... I hate to think how the whole 'Diana death' business will become, has already become, a homogenous myth, like the "chirpy cockney in the blitz" myth along the lines of 'a nation mourns' [C2761].

The 'homogenous myth' of Diana's mourning was, of course, of a nation 'UNITED IN GRIEF' over the death of their 'People's Princess'. Such an unambiguous meta-narrative of popular reactions was first provided by Tony Blair on the day of the news, in a tribute scripted by Alastair Campbell and borrowed from an old phrase of Julie Burchill's (Toolis 1998; Burchill 1992). Unusually united, certainly, in echoing this story were the British media in their coverage of the extraordinary week that followed. In the tabloids a picture of a distraught man with a mohican haircut laying a huge wreath was among the many images used to demonstrate that 'from punk to pensioner, grief knew no barrier' (*Daily Mail* 3.9.1997). In the more sophisticated broadsheets the view was no different. The extraordinary popular reaction was proof of Diana's 'prized political entity, a rainbow coalition of diverse groups' (Moore 1997: 33) embracing royalist and republican, men and women, old and young, black and white, gay and straight in 'as near as it is possible to get to a cross-section of the country' (Engel 1997).

The media, as noted above, discovered yet another contemporary reincarnation of the 'myth of the blitz' (Calder 1991), as they emphasised the collective unity of a population 'sharing flasks of tea with people they have never met' (Freedland 1997) as they joined the mourning queues as strangers and left as friends (BBC/ITV 5/6.9.1997). Indeed it was television coverage which 'most insistently presented a "seamless unity of grief"' (Kitzinger 1999: 73), as cameras routinely focused on weeping faces and juxtaposed them with shots of huge crowds to convey the impression of the same collective response. Ironically the only threat to such unity seemed to come from Britain's traditional symbol of it, the royal family, which faced angry public and media demands to return from Balmoral and 'SHOW US YOU CARE' (*Daily Express* 4.9.1997). The family duly came out to meet 'the people', the flag was lowered and the Queen issued a televised tribute to Diana in what was presented as an unequivocal victory for people power. As one paper triumphantly told its readers, 'YOU SPOKE, THEY LISTENED' (*Daily Mirror* 5.9.1997). This was part of an evocation of popular attitudes over the week which was above all characterised by 'an absence of ambivalence' (Billig 1997a: 505).

Such ambivalence about the popular mood has also been largely absent from subsequent academic analysis. Royal historian David Cannadine offered a contemporary explanation of the 'depth and intensity' of a popular reaction to news which had 'left unmoved and untouched only the hardest of hearts and the meanest of spirits'. This, he argued, was 'overwhelmingly the general verdict' (1997: 11). And so it has remained as subsequent analyses have largely emphasised 'the unity that was put in place, however precariously, in the aftermath of Diana's death' (Hay 1999: 68), speculated whether it reversed 'a sense of national fragmentation' (Richards, Wilson and Woodhead 1999: 3), and stressed 'the commonality of the affect, which crossed all sorts of boundaries of class, race, gender, age and political and intellectual inclination' (New Formations 1999: 5). Douglas Davies (1999) provides such a story with some hefty theoretical support. In an analysis applied to previous royal ceremonies and Kennedy's mourning (Shils and Young 1953; Blumer et al 1971; Dayan and Katz 1992; Verba 1965), he joins others (Roseneil 2001) in

claiming the presence of a Durkheimian unifying and sacred civic ritual. This was accompanied by the emergence, in Victor Turner's words, of a 'liminal' bonding period of 'communitas' which temporarily eroded existing social hierarchies. While such verdicts have dominated scholarly analysis, they have not, however, been wholeheartedly accepted. In September 1997 an unlikely rearguard unity was forged between dissenting left and right-wing journalists who questioned the extent and depth of the people's grief (Wilson 1997; Littlejohn 1997; Ferguson 1997; Waterhouse 1997; Smith 1997; Marrin 1997). Subsequent analyses have developed this challenge to a reaction which was 'far less extensive than originally supposed' (Merck 1988: 3), suggesting 'another Britain' (Hitchens 1998) composed of 'a big, big silent minority' (Parris 1998) of 'those who felt differently' (Jack 1997) or diversely (McGuigan 2000).

The above studies have, in their different ways, offered important insights into the popular response, which this paper aims to build upon. But their shortcomings also need addressing. First is something of a polarisation of analyses, between dismissive cultural élitism on the one side and uncritical cultural populism (McGuigan 1992) on the other. Some sceptical accounts (for example Hitchens) offer important insights into dissenting attitudes, but have been unwilling or unable to take seriously the feelings of mourners, instead falling back on long-discredited, not to mention intellectually patronising dismissals of media-generated 'mass hysteria' (for a history see Blackman and Valentine 2000). Equally partial, however, are accounts which simplistically equate Diana's mourners with 'the people' in opposition to a non-mourning constructed as coming solely from 'marginalised intellectuals' (Johnson 1999: 35), cynical members of the chattering classes unable, unlike the authors, to empathise with the popular mood.

This also links to a second problem. For all the emphasis on 'the people', one of the puzzling oversights of such studies has been a failure to offer any detailed, empirical exploration of a popular reaction largely assumed to be self-evidently on display in September 1997 (Couldry 1999). Partly this can be traced to the dominance of textualist cultural studies in analyses of the Diana events (Kear and Steinberg 1999; New Formations 1999; Re: Public 1997; Merck 1998), which have been sometimes guilty of a dizzying circularity in which a taken-for-granted popular response offers the cue for some highly selective deconstructions of Diana's life to explain it. Even Walter's excellent empirically-based edited survey (1999a) fails to break this circle. Its bid to provide 'an intelligent record of and interpretation of what happened' (D. Davies: 5) is confined to a largely one-eyed history which devotes seventeen chapters to the mourning and just one (C. Davies) to illuminating other popular experiences. Such an imbalance, while understandable, remains curious given the acknowledgement that those who did not mourn were 'an important part of the picture' (Walter 1999: 31), and as a similarly skewed analysis nevertheless suggests, 'must be included within any fair assessment of the Diana phenomenon' (Richards, Wilson and Woodhead 1999: 10).

In any study of the popular mood the first port of call is usually the opinion polls. Yet, as Robert Worcester (1997) noted, one puzzling aspect of a week in which popular opinion was the main story was that no poll was commissioned by the media to assess it. This was a shame because those that were eventually taken after the funeral offered some interesting, if largely ignored findings. Over a quarter declared themselves 'very upset', with a further 42 per cent 'fairly upset'. 26 per cent – an astonishing 10 million plus – stated they had signed the book of condolence, with a fifth claiming that they planned to do so. One person in six

said they had left a floral tribute and a further 11 per cent stated that they would. On the other hand, just under a third were either not 'very upset' or 'not upset at all' by that stage. 50 per cent had not and did not intend to sign a book of condolence while 70 per cent wanted no part in the placing of flowers. Even aside from the way such polls over-exaggerated mourning sentiments (see conclusion), this suggests a more complex picture of attitudes than was widely articulated by the media.

Indeed the media, often the second port of call for opinion, can itself hardly be viewed as an unproblematic mirror of attitudes given the partiality of its coverage. This not only virtually excluded 'those who felt differently' (Jack 1997), but also offered a misleading view of 'those who didn't', focusing on an apparently hysterically upset minority of mourners rather than a majority quietly in control of their emotions (Monger and Chandler 1998; Biddle and Walter 1998; McKibbin 1997). The one mourner in tears made for a better story than the ninety-nine that were not (Walter et al 1995), not to mention the hundred who were not there at all - but also made for a less accurate one. Moreover, even a close scrutiny of overwhelmingly monolithic media coverage suggests a more complex response.<sup>1</sup> On the far-left the tiny-circulation *Morning Star* largely ignored the event – devoting just four column inches to the news - save for one passionate front-page denunciation of 'the rotten monarchical system that continues to leech us' (6.9.1997). A more substantial alternative came from the (Glasgow) *Herald*, which allocated 60 per cent of its news coverage to non-Diana stories and featured a range of critical articles and letters. *Private Eye*, meanwhile, lived up to its satirical tradition with an attack on media and public hypocrisy (4.9.1997) which proved its point by being banned from many retail outlets. Rather tamer, but reaching a larger total audience, the quality national press all featured a range of dissenting letters about the mourning, even if they barely dented the 'united in grief' media hegemony.

Nevertheless this does suggest the need for further examination of the popular mood, a point confirmed by the scattering of empirical studies that have taken place. One small-scale study of Anglo-Celtic women living in Australia found a diversity of attitudes to Diana's life and mourning, ranging from very positive to neutral to very negative (Black and Smith 1999). Another small survey by the British National Lesbian and Gay Survey (an offshoot from Mass-Observation) revealed (Thomas 2001) identification with, but also indifference and hostility to the Diana 'fairy story' widely detected by commentators (Valentine and Butler 1999; Spurlin 1999). A more specific but larger examination of attitudes to television coverage by the British Film Institute also demonstrated a complex reaction in which 50 per cent of its 275 respondents were personally unaffected by the tragedy (Turnock 2000). Even a documentary film of Diana's mourners which sought 'to impose no vision, only to discover what is there' (Alexander 1998), unearthed a rather different picture to that conveyed at the time (it was only broadcast a year later). While some in London wept, others

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<sup>1</sup> Drawing on the media to criticise media bias (which this paper continues to do) raises, as Herman and Chomsky note, the accusation that such criticism is self-refuting. Particularly in this case when many dissenting articles and letters were written in response to or explicitly criticised media bias, their counter has considerable weight: 'That the media provides some facts about an issue, however, proves absolutely nothing about the adequacy or accuracy of that coverage ... That a careful reader looking for a fact can sometimes find it with diligence and a sceptical eye tells us nothing about whether that fact received the attention and context it deserved, whether it was intelligible to the reader or effectively distorted or suppressed. What level of attention it deserved is debatable, but there is no merit in the pretence that because certain facts may be found in the media by a diligent and sceptical researcher, the absence of radical bias and de facto suppression is thereby demonstrated' (1994: xiv-xv).

were curious sightseers enjoying a 'just marvellous' day out. One man watching the funeral in a Bristol pub captured a frequently less than reverential attitude as he considered it 'all very sad ... but I've got me drop of Scrumpy. I don't care {laughs}', while a fellow drinker, turned off by the continuous media coverage commented dejectedly: 'I came here to get away from the fucking funeral' (*The Princess's People* 1998).

But perhaps the most far-reaching qualitative survey of popular attitudes was undertaken by the Mass-Observation Archive (M-OA). Mass-Observation (M-O) functioned originally between 1937 to the early 1950s as a qualitative opinion-research organisation or 'social movement' (Summerfield 1985). Founded by Tom Harrisson, Charles Madge and Humphrey Jennings, it aimed, in their words, for 'an anthropology of ourselves' through a panel of participant observers composed of 'ordinary hard-working folk' (Sheridan et al 2000: 34). Loosely structured 'directives' directed their attention to and encouraged them to write anonymously at length on particular issues rather than simply answer yes and no as required by a conventional questionnaire. The value of this evidence has provoked dispute since its foundation. Indeed in the post-war vogue amongst social scientists for all things quantitative, the original project ceased operation amidst blistering critiques of its 'inchoate and uncontrolled' techniques (Abrams 1951: 112). Historians used to working with statistically imperfect sources have been more inclined to look positively at M-O, particularly since the 1950s and 1960s when the discipline developed and legitimised M-O's early interest in the 'ordinary hard-working folk' traditionally 'hidden from history'. The simultaneous emergence of cultural studies as an academic discipline gave academic credibility to a project focused on the experience of everyday life and which has indeed been seen (if little recognised) as 'a pioneering venture' (Stanton 1996: 335) in the development of this field. The project, once academically dismissed or ignored (Stanley 1990) has more recently experienced something of a gradual 'rehabilitation'. (Stanley 1981: 272). It has been hailed as offering a valuable 'alternative tradition' of qualitative social science (Finch 1986: 96), with the detailed 'thick description' (Geertz 1975) of its evidence providing rich insights into everyday life, valuable even (or especially) if untypical (Stanley 1981; Finch 1986; Sheridan et al 2000). A number of empirical studies have suggested that its evidence on the war years offered a more accurate view of popular attitudes than quantitative polling methods (Sheridan et al 2000; Calder 1985; Finch 1986; Hinton 1997). And M-O has certainly been much used by historians documenting the popular mood between 1940-51 (for example Calder 1969; Addison 1975; Fielding et al 1995; Howkins 1998), even if the contemporary project known as the Mass-Observation Project (M-OP) remains curiously less explored. Indeed the almost total failure of cultural studies to explore the archive's material seems particularly puzzling given its sharp 'ethnographic turn' in the 1980s to qualitative studies of audiences (Morley 1992). Nevertheless as this illustrates, the relaunch of the project in 1981 reflected the more favourable intellectual climate in general and particularly in anthropology, a discipline which has always had close links with M-O (Sheridan et al 2000).

However some of the old suspicion remains and one of the consistent complaints has remained that its self-selecting volunteers are not statistically representative of the British population, being disproportionately female, lower middle-class and over 40. Yet nor are they 'seriously unrepresentative' either, being drawn from all classes, ages and areas with 'backgrounds comparable to a very high proportion of the British population at the end of the twentieth century' (Thane 2001: 219). In any case the M-O Project does not aim

for statistical generalisations but offers a qualitative complement or alternative. The 'telling cases' that its evidence offers, both collectively and individually, allows for analytical generalisations not to populations but to theories and interpretations which can explain the 'how' and 'why' questions about the mourning and non-mourning rather than the statistical issues of 'how many' (Sheridan 1998). Observers, to quote Jennings and Madge, act as 'subjective cameras' of life, illuminating 'not what society is like but what it looks like to them' (Sheridan et al 2000: 34). And if their picture is viewed primarily as opinion (Bloome et al 1993) rather than as fact (although this is not to discount this latter value if cautiously interpreted), then this subjectivity, traditionally a source of criticism, becomes a source of strength.

It is also notable that the M-OA's very existence owes much to the interests of its founders in popular attitudes to royalty. The original project emerged in response to the abdication crisis, its first book detailed responses to George VI's coronation and later books returned to the theme (Jennings and Madge 1937; Harris 1966). Moreover, its contemporary re-launch stemmed from a one-off survey of the 1977 Silver Jubilee (Ziegler 1978) and an interest in examining the popular significance of the 1981 royal wedding. (Sheridan et al 2000). So it was not surprising that in September 1997 the organisation's long-standing archivist Dorothy Sheridan quickly sent out a special directive to the M-O correspondents entitled 'The Death of Diana'.<sup>2</sup> This request for views received 249 replies, ranging from 1-24 pages, although the response rate of 54% was interestingly one of the lowest in recent years. In common with the above qualitative surveys, its overriding feature is the diversity and complexity of popular attitudes. General reactions to the news varied dramatically. On one extreme a woman wrote: 'I have felt more upset by the Princess's death than that of my father' [H2603], while the opposite perspective was provided by a 71 year-old female retired librarian from Purley who broke all stereotypes by revealing: 'Whoopee! Was my first uncensored reaction' [G1041]. While some found the week incredibly moving, others were profoundly alienated and angered by the perceived public reaction. Alongside such polarities were a rather more complex range of responses, as sadness and tears competed with hostility to Diana's sanctification and embarrassment and disgust at an 'over the top' case of 'mass hysteria'. Nor was opinion easy to categorise. One man, for instance, was initially unmoved on hearing the news, sad enough on the Monday to compile a special newspaper scrap-book tribute to Diana, yet subsequently worried and frustrated by 'everyone's unquestioning sadness' [G2701]. Popular experiences over the course of the week differed markedly. Some detected a mood of mass grieving in which everyone felt the same. Others puzzled at the contrast between the media images and their unawareness of anyone who grieved, or reported a public reaction largely characterised by apathy alongside interest in conspiracy theories and sick jokes. The rest of this paper will briefly outline and analyse the main areas of comment and the complex identities and attitudes to be found in opinions towards the mourning. In keeping with the archive's intention to provide a forum for those hidden

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<sup>2</sup> It read: This is a special directive giving you the opportunity to respond to the tragic death of the Princess of Wales. Some of you have already written in with your immediate reactions: others of you may be expecting a special mailing from us in view of Mass-Observation's long-standing interest in national events and the significance of the monarchy. Whatever your views and feelings, whether you are a royalist or a republican, please send us your reflections, feelings, opinions, observations. Feel free to discuss whatever you think is important, including the media coverage and any other issues you feel may be relevant. If you change your opinions and feelings, please chart the change. An occasional diary might be the best way to go about it. Many of you used such a diary to good effect during the Gulf War and the last General Election. Date everything you write, and include cuttings etc if they seem to add to your account. Add your M-O number as usual, and a brief biography.

from history, it will rely heavily on correspondents to articulate them. It will then conclude with an extended assessment of its value in illuminating popular reactions to Diana's death.

## **2 A People's Princess?**

The starting point for many observers was obviously their attitudes towards Diana. While the media claimed to detect overwhelmingly positive attitudes to a woman 'BORN A LADY, BECAME A PRINCESS, DIED A SAINT' (*Daily Mirror* 1.9.1997), M-O correspondents, by contrast, offered a huge complexity and diversity of opinion. Adulation, praise and qualified identification competed with indifference, equivocation and hostility, sometimes among the same accounts. One of the most common positive sentiments was of a woman who 'had the common touch' [H276], who was 'natural with people and not distanced from them' like the royal family [A2801], and who 'touched hearts with her kindness, her compassion, her mixing with just ordinary people in everyday life' [B736]. As one correspondent, a 35-year old woman mourner from Manchester, put it:

In the end Diana was a 'people' person – if protocol got in the way she just went around it. To the traditional Royals that must be like trying to stop breathing. Perhaps that is why our grief is so intense – she really was our princess [B2638]

Such identifications shows close similarity with the dominant theme of analysis which suggests that 'the overwhelming feeling' (Blackman and Walkerdine 2000: 149) in the country was that Diana was 'one of us', a royal with 'the common touch', an extraordinarily ordinary figure (Segal 1998; Blackman 1999). In this way she perfectly embodied what has often been stressed to be the central ambiguity necessary for the popular appeal of a modern, mediated royalty, that they are both like us and not like us - not 'too royal' like Charles or 'too ordinary' like 'Fergie' but royal *and* ordinary or what Nairn calls 'super-ordinary' (1988: 27; see also Billig, 1997b; Williamson, 1988; Couldry 2001).

That this was a crucial element to understanding the depth and breadth of Diana's extraordinary appeal is beyond doubt. But even this had its limitations and reveals only one side to a distinctly double-edged coin as viewed by Mass-Observers who often define their identity rather more unequivocally as 'ordinary' people and not 'one of them' (Bloome et al 1993). Contrary to the idea that the mourning saw a collapse of social hierarchies, the élite position Diana embodied often remained present, blocking or qualifying identification. Indeed even the very depiction of her as 'one of us' illustrated this as it made sense only when based on awareness that she was really 'one of them'. Only because Diana was a member of the élite was her ordinariness worthy of comment (Billig, 1997; Nairn, 1988), an ambivalence captured perfectly in her 'people's princess' epitaph. For as Billig points out, 'The People's Princess is still a princess, not one of the people ... she was ordinary for a princess. She remains a princess in the legend, otherwise there is little legend'. (Billig 1997a: 506) A female civil servant was attending a TUC rally on the Sunday morning and was unaware of the news. She overheard one of the organisers talking about whether the event would go ahead:



I thought perhaps a famous revolutionary had died ... It surprised me to find that trade union activists expressed genuine grief over the death of someone from the aristocracy ... It seems absurd to call a woman brought up in wealth and privilege the people's princess' [G2089].

While such views stemmed from Diana's exceptional lifestyle, at the same time her life was seen as far from exceptional in comparison with other more extraordinary and ordinary people. Royalists placed Diana's publicity seeking charity work alongside the frequently unsung labours of other members of the royal family. An even more unsung heroine, it was widely suggested, was Mother Teresa, a woman who '*lived* her philosophy in a much more valid way than did Diana' [S1383], but whose death in the same week was, observers complained, largely eclipsed by Diana's eulogies. Meanwhile ordinary people did much the same or rather more without any publicity or recognition for their work. As one man noted: 'I do not think she was exceptional' in a context in which there were 'plenty of others who exercise, or who have exercised similar regard' [P1278]. Indeed the only thing that made her exceptional was the 'other life' that she enjoyed:

As to the good Diana did yes maybe but many, many others slog away actually working in the slums, hospitals, war zones ... she didn't have to negotiate or painstakingly work out methods to relieve suffering. Then at the end of the day she could return to luxury, holidays and nannies etc [H1709].

From these perspectives Diana's 'one of them' position alongside a life no better than that of 'one of us' ensured her story was dismissed or debunked, rather than celebrated, as an extraordinarily ordinary one. Yet while there were polarities of attitudes on display, such competing assessments were, as the above quote suggests, not always mutually exclusive. Individual accounts often conveyed a complex and contradictory mixture of the positive and negative, about her charity work, personality, and relationship with the royal family and the press. And while many defined themselves in opposition to Diana's canonisation which they imagined mourners to be doing, among mourners she was largely seen as a more flawed character who was 'more sinned against than sinning' [B1386]. One observer wrote how 'everything was double-edged with Diana' [F1373] and this was certainly true of the verdicts that followed. Such findings, while at variance with the evidence from media coverage, show close similarities with previous studies of British attitudes to royalty. In particular Michael Billig's penetrating analysis revealed that beneath the appearance of unqualified devotion even among royalists were contradictory 'on the one hand' and 'on the other hand' sentiments 'in which the possibility of resentment was always present, even at times of celebration' (1997b: 117). Such a 'dialectic of envy and sympathy' (127) towards 'them', saw sympathy for the 'rotten job' and loss of privacy (dramatically symbolised by Diana's life and death) balanced with envy for the privileges and wealth which came with their 'job' and cynicism about their 'ordinariness'. Meanwhile this was juxtaposed with the sacrifices and demands made on, and achievements of ordinary people in their lives (see also Hoggart 1957).

Such complexity of response has also to be further set within the profound ambiguity of Diana's life which embraced many 'mutually contradictory ... personae' (Paglia 1995: 170), which could be interpreted in many different ways (Davies 2001). Some saw a life of humanitarian concern for others, the story presented on her death. Others drew on the less flattering narratives offered during her lifetime, not least by a media which had previously derided Diana as 'a trash icon for our times' (Fountain 1997), symbolic of 'a superficial, amoral and empty post-modern Nineties' (Brunt 1999: 21). Indeed the ambiguity of what

Diana's life represented, or could be claimed to represent, politically generated diverse reactions both among royalists and republicans. Some royalists could positively view Diana as 'truly the brightest jewel our royal family had' [B1386]. And indeed the entire premise of demands that the Queen lead the mourning of her ex-daughter in law entailed 'a casting back to the fairytale beginning' (Benton 1998: 93) to at least give the subsequent horror story a royalist end fit for a princess. Equally, one of the most notable, if over-noted, aspects of the mourning was its anti-establishment, even republican side as Diana reached a constituency previously untouched by royalty as blacks, gays and the homeless mingled with middle-England in a radical 'floral revolution' (Jacques 1997). A left-wing anti-royalist female nurse considered:

She was as near to an anarchist as you can get in the Royal Family. I always dreamed of what would happen if a Royal became an anarchist and said "up yours" to their ways. Diana did that, almost, well, as best she could [B2810].

In agreement with such sentiments - but from a negative perspective - were royalists who could not grieve a woman who 'wanted to cause irrevocable damage to our beloved and much needed Royal Family' [D1602]. Some even thought her death had 'happened for the best' as 'we now have one royal family, not two' [J1481]. Inversely, in the accounts of some republicans Diana's anti-establishment status was notable not simply by its total absence but by the automatic assumption of the opposite perspective towards 'an aristocrat who voted for Thatcher' [P1730], a conservative figure who still symbolised an institution that was 'unarguably, indisputably, fundamentally wrong' [C2722]. Again, however, this is to simplify often complex attitudes. One royalist, for instance, balanced admiration for 'a good person ... doing a lot to help various sectors of society' with a defence of the 'perfectly correct' behaviour of the mourning royals once again misrepresented by a vicious press. [P1637]. On the other side a republican man, largely hostile to 'a woman who spent a fortune on clothes and cosmetics', was also captivated by the popular radicalism generated by Earl Spencer's anti-royalist funeral speech [L2393]. In such ways the ambiguity of Diana's life and death, the source of her extraordinary range of appeal, was also the source of its limitations. While much of the existing literature has rightly highlighted the diverse, contradictory identifications this could produce (for example Kear and Steinberg 1999) the obvious, if rather ignored, flip side were diverse, even contradictory dis-identifications or partial identifications as well.

### **3 A Women's Mourning?**

While attitudes to Diana cut across political boundaries as royalists found themselves united with republicans on both mourning and non-mourning sides, a more traditional difference in attitudes came along gender lines. Women were keener to voice their opinions in response to the directive - 56 per cent of women as against 49 per cent of males replied. Women were collectively and also individually far more upset, if rather more evenly divided in opinion than men, who remained largely unmoved or hostile. Such a gender divide did not go unnoticed by some correspondents who saw 'men by and large bemused by the strength of feeling expressed' [C2761] or 'sorry but not as upset as the women' [H1774]. Moreover, the

Archive provides rich testimony of the profound engagement which some women clearly made with Diana during her life. One woman, around the same age of Diana, outlined:

... like most of the country I wanted to know her, felt I did know her because of her ability to inspire you, to touch you, to empathise with you. She reached millions of people, including me, in millions of ways and I think each person felt it personally to them, however she reached them. I had problems with self worth, so did she, I wanted to be loved, so did she, I was Di, so was she. I admired her for what she did – her charities, her compassion, her wearing her heart on her sleeve, her difficult role as a mother and wife. But I also wanted to be like her – I wanted her hairstyle, her figure, her poise, her ease with people, her assurance – things I don't have. To both ends I was fascinated – I admired and wanted to be like her [W729].

The intense level of this personal identification (see also below) was, however, far less visible among even the small number of sympathetic male accounts, a pattern which shows close similarities with all existing evidence. This reveals that women outnumbered men by up to 4 to 1 at mourning sites and in written tributes (Kellner 1997; Jones 1999), and were more psychologically more affected than men with unusually high suicide levels among middle-aged females following the news (Shevlin et al 1999; Hawton et al 2000). Marked gender differences were further noted in international mourning behaviour in Australia and America (Duraz and Johnson 1999; Griffin 1999; Re: Public 1997).

Given that women showed more interest in Diana's life, it should be hardly surprising that this was repeated on her death, while as women grieve more than men (Walter 1999b), one would also expect this to be reflected in Diana's case. More specifically, women obviously had more affinity with her marital difficulties while her depression, eating disorder and attempted suicide were all problems far more common among women than men (James 1997). Taking the personal into the political domain, a number of high profile accounts have hailed Diana as a feminist role model who 'got a life' which embodied radical causes as she fought back and gained independence through battles with depression, an eating disorder, not to mention a misogynist husband and establishment. (Burchill, 1992, 1998; Moore 1995; Campbell 1998a; Purvis 1997; Griffin 1999). This radical later life climaxed in a radical mourning which saw a revolutionary eruption of 'the feminine' into a masculinised public sphere (Barcan 1997), a revolt against 'a patriarchy gone dry-eyed and stiff' (Showalter 1997) which showed that emotions could be political. Such attitudes were certainly held by several Mass-Observers:

It is as a woman, and as a feminist that I most deeply admire what Diana achieved. She fought for the truth despite a terrible betrayal which would fell most people. She was unafraid to speak of her bulimia. She was unafraid to utilise psychotherapy (when mental illness has such stigma) She was unafraid to speak out. She was a role model for women all over the world [R2247].

Nevertheless, these radical associations with Diana were confined to a minority. Far more prominent in this collective response and other empirical studies (Black and Smith 1999) were broadly conservative identifications. The tragedy of a love-story gone wrong with Charles or just about to go right with Dodi generated much comment among women but little amongst men. More positively, there was also the appeal of her glamour and fashion.

I loved her for her looks. I loved her for her compassion and I loved her for her showing the world how much she loved her children. If only Charles had loved her, what a wonderful Queen she would have been [C2579].

Above all, however, was an almost instinctive, repeated identification made by women – but much less so among men - with ‘the boys’ following the news:

My first thought was for the princes ... having two sons myself I thought of the devastating impact this would have on them’ [G2486].

At no time did I want to cry and disintegrate. I was shocked by the suddenness and horror of the manner of death and the awful loss of her two boys – one of whom is much the same age as my son’ [D826].

Over the 20<sup>th</sup> century one central level of popular identification with the monarchy has been through its symbolic position as ‘the family of families’ (Schama 1986; Williamson 1988; Billig 1997b), a cult of the ordinary ‘family on the throne’ which was particularly strong in the 1940s and 1950s (Pimlott 1997). The Charles-Diana marital disaster was only the most damaging of a series of contemporary crises which rather undermined this position. Yet paradoxically despite this, Diana emerged as the institution’s most normal, warm embodiment of family life (Pimlott, 1997; Morton 1992). In life and death she was popularly contrasted with the cold, emotionally stunted Windsors as ‘the only person who let them {her sons} live a life a bit more like normal boys their ages unlike that they experienced with their dad’s side of the family’ [M2493]. In this her appeal as ‘one of us’ was a particularly feminine one, for such sympathy was largely notable by its absence in male accounts. And taking this further, it is significant that it was almost always women who commented that it was like a member of their family had died, a gendered intimacy towards royalty also shown to be visible in life (Billig 1997b). In this sense it is arguable that Diana functioned as a condensed social symbol (D. Davies, 1999) for many women for the existence of normal family life and her death struck at the heart of fears of its disruption.

Such conservative identifications with a feminine rather than a feminist icon bolster dissenting arguments from the latter camp that Diana’s life and even her ‘tragic’ death reinforced traditional anti-feminist values which celebrated glamour, sexuality, beauty, along with victimhood, innocence and mother-love (Holt 1998; Smith 1998; Gerrard 1997). Studies have consistently shown a greater level of women’s interest in the fashion and glamour of the royal family and a clear, underlying assumption that the subject, the symbol of the private sphere of the family, was ‘a woman’s realm’ from which men were largely absent (Billig 1997b). This was evident in Diana’s funeral, which echoed a pattern in which men, even loyalist men, remained absent from royal ceremonials doing manly things like mowing the lawn or working in the shed, while women, even those out of sympathy with royalty, watched the event. As one female cynic noted in passing:

As the main part of the day is being taken up with watching Diana’s funeral on television, my husband has arranged to go out. Rather ironically, he’s volunteered to go and help with the school’s Duke of Edinburgh scheme! ... I wave him off and sit down in front of the television with my daughter [W1813].

One man whose wife wanted to watch the coverage ‘as a historical event’ was explicitly ‘reminded of Diana’s wedding, when my sister had watched the event on TV for similar reasons and I’d retired to my bedroom ... for the duration’ [C2722]. In such ways Diana’s life and death may have reproduced traditional

enactments of masculinity and femininity found in past royal events. For while women expressed their interest and emotions in relation to 'women's things' concerning the family, fashion and 'the boys', men, by contrast, were largely absent from the debate and even the home, deriding the over-emotional females and concerning themselves with rather more serious, rational matters. Just as Diana's mourning had produced an eruption of the feminine into a masculinised public sphere, so the same was true for her wedding - which no-one had of course suggested could be claimed for a feminist movement whose slogan was 'Don't Do It Di' (Simmons 1984: Billig 1999). Both, it could be argued, produced a Bakhtinian 'carnival' (Shepherd 1993), as 'a world turned upside down' by a temporary eruption of the feminine during the mourning only confirmed a masculinised normality when turned back again.

This also demonstrates, as gender historians have argued, that women's experiences must be seen 'not in isolation but in a persistent system of gender relationships' (Higonnet and Higonnet 1987: 34). It is no coincidence that while most broadly sympathetic perspectives on the mourning have come from women, more hostile analyses have tended to come from men, with prominent left-wing journalists particularly scathing of 'the feminist canonisation ... of a modern Marie-Antoinette' (Steele, 1998; Cohen, 1998). This in turn provoked bitter counter-attacks on a 'sexist socialism ... uncontaminated by the people' (Campbell 1998b) but guilty of collaboration with 'those frozen sticks of fossilised shit that are the Court' (Grant 1997) - prose in turn mocked for having hysterically 'slipped the constraints of reason' (Cohen 1997: 34). Such gender conflict was also found on the ground. One woman was 'upset' by 'all those ... snide remarks by left-wing males' she knew [B2810]. While one woman's husband was 'absolutely furious' with her for wanting to watch the funeral, another woman recorded how: 'Thankfully my partner was not at home to see my watery eyes, or make cutting comments during the funeral service' [T2543]. Moreover, while women Mass-Observers were divided in their attitudes to Diana's mourning, the same is less true of men, who were rather more united against it than women were in favour. While this may not be the case more broadly, it is worth noting that the most common phrase used by Mass-Observers - by most male volunteers and many women - was 'mass hysteria', a phrase which increasingly in retrospect has replaced 'people power' as the defining narrative of the event. Such a 'gendered backlash', in associating the mourning in general and particularly 'all those women over-reacting' [M1381] with an age-old, reactionary stereotype of feminine irrationality (Showalter 1997b), may again even have reinforced male dominance of the public sphere.

#### **4 A Grieving Matter?**

As the above section suggests, differing responses to Diana's life and death were only part of the story offered by Mass-Observers. Frequently their accounts were as much about the mourning that followed. This was also true of media coverage which focused intensely on what it claimed as the 'very depths of the people's grief' (Daily Mail 4.9.1997). One journalist, referring to what he called 'private grief, multiplied millions of times over', noted: 'Everybody I have spoken to ... feels personally bereaved, as if a close relation had died' (Utley 1997). Such a position has been supported, in qualified form, by academics who have suggested that this grief felt was 'real', even if less painful than personal loss (Walter 1999a), a point

at least partly confirmed by one small-scale study which found significant psychological distress among its sample (Shevlin et al 1999). And certainly some Mass-Observers testified to a reaction of deep distress and pain which they compared to personal bereavement: 'Like a lot of people I felt that I had lost a close member of my family' [M2811]. Obviously the identifications which some people made with Diana's life help explain these feelings, as did the shock of her death or feelings of their own mortality. Even for those with no admiration, the news sometimes triggered past grief. But underlying much of this was a feeling of 'personal' loss. As one woman noted: 'What you hear again and again, both on the media and first-hand is how people felt that they knew Princess Diana - 'she was my friend' [R1227; see also W729's comments above]. The reason for such feelings can be traced to the way the modern media has produced an 'era of intimacy' between people and celebrities which results in a viewing and reading experience of 'para-social interaction' or 'intimacy at a distance' with stars. Despite its non-reciprocal nature, this experience can affect people in ways similar to normal friendships (Giles 2000; Myers 2000). And it is often stronger among women and in response to soap operas, a melodrama which both the long-running saga of 'the royals' (Coward 1984), and Diana's dramatic life and even more dramatic death has been endlessly compared to (Geraghty 1998; Aron and Livingstone 1998; Turnock 2000).

Both intellectual and popular common sense is, however, ultimately dismissive of the perceived abnormal, unhealthy or superficial feelings stimulated by such non-personal 'interaction'. As the above writer added: 'It's odd. They have never met her' (R1227), a point regularly made by mourners as they puzzled over their feelings 'for a stranger', as well as more contemptuously by others who thought they should 'get a life' [G2701]. This more particularly illustrated their deviance from a 20<sup>th</sup> century British cultural norm under which grief, for it to be seen as genuine, has to be personally experienced (Walter 1999b), which was exactly the common-sense view which other correspondents, even those sympathetic to Diana, felt was central to explaining their disengaged reaction. As an 18 year-old Bristol female stated: 'I at least couldn't really mourn for someone I didn't know. It would have been a challenge to *the nature* of mourning and grief' [D2739] (my emphasis). And while Diana's death acted as a 'trigger' for grieving past losses, amongst others this experience ensured a strong resentment at the equation of the two:

Diana ... died a week or two after my wife – an event which taught me how acute the pains of grief are. That is the pain of losing somebody close whose departure leaves one – or has left me – intensely sad, more so than ever before experienced. There seems little point in going on, nights are disturbed and the sight of some article brings vividly to mind a memory and a rekindled sense of utter loneliness ... Can it be, I now ask, that the national - even international grief – brought about by the death of Diana be anything comparable to the personal grief felt by most of us sooner or later? ... a mass outpouring of grief for some person that 99 % of the population never saw is to be deplored for it is not true grief, a strictly personal matter best eased in private helped by a few proven friends [R1418].

These last comments also illustrate the way the mourning gave dramatic focus to a contemporary cultural battle between people (often men and/or older people) who believe in the traditional English 'stiff upper lip' of private grief, and 'expressivists' (often female and/or young) who believe in the desirability of talking about problems (Walter 1999b). The latter philosophy, of which Diana was a prominent symbol, appeared triumphant during a mourning in which the 'wobbly bottom lip' was widely legitimised by Tony Blair and the media as the only acceptable response from the royals down. Some Mass-Observers who shared this

criticism of the 'emotionally inarticulate' royals, viewed this positively: 'People from all walks of life are now actually verbalising their feelings more fully. How wonderful' [H1845]. Others, however, considered that an 'undignified contrived' public wallowing in grief compared unfavourably to an older British wartime tradition where 'we mourned our friends in school prayer and then went about our business' [K1515]. Those, republicans as well as royalists, who believed that grief should be personal and privately expressed were again united in defending the royal family from attacks because 'people grieving need at least a few days to do so in private' [B2605]. In a culture in which the role of the non-bereaved is to support those personally affected (Walter 1999), it was 'disrespectful to the Princes' to equate their grief with that of the public as 'how can loss of a public figure compare with death of one's own mother at the age of 12 and 15?' [D826] It was 'after all ... for us to give them sympathy not the other way about' [D2051].

Such distinctions meant that those who were not mourning found the public reaction 'difficult to understand'. The level of grief for a stranger was simply not seen as legitimate but was instead 'truly unnatural ... ridiculous' [M1171], a depressing, alarming - and wasteful in the money spent on flowers - act of media-induced 'mass hysteria'. Such feelings were also found in more mixed accounts of those who clearly did feel something, but were not prepared to equate their reaction with the levels of grief they imagined mourners to hold. As one woman pointed out: 'I didn't feel sick and distraught like when my sister-in-law died last year, but I did feel a sense of personal bereavement'. But while 'strangely moved by the death of a stranger', she had little identification with the 'hysteria of so many' [S2207]. She went on to add her puzzlement as to 'why would anyone want to queue for hours to sign a book of condolence?'. This again relates to the cultural dominance of privatised grief which sees death as a personal, private tragedy which should not impede other people's lives from proceeding as usual (Walter 1999b). Periodically, however, older traditions of communal mourning re-emerge, as at Hillsborough (Walter 1991) and Dunblane. One woman from Kent captured the clash in these two very different types of mourning from the latter perspective.

That weekend was the town's Hop Festival and despite what happened the Festival went on. It seemed inappropriate to hear jolly music for Morris dancing through the open window and when we walked into the town centre I began to feel that the event should not go on. My husband, more forthright than me, spoke to a couple of those responsible for its organisation and expressed his shock and dismay that it had not been cancelled; he was quite upset that their answer was "Life's got to go on" [H2637].

In many ways her desired approach quickly predominated. Normal politics was suspended while all public and even private events were cancelled on funeral day. Television programmes were purged of any sign of violence, humour or even Paris, pop stars united in grief behind Elton John and postponed record releases more unprofitable than disrespectful, while even the sex shops in Soho joined the retail community's shut down in a rare 'mark of respect'. Some observers found it 'very moving to think that people will do this' [F1634], with the woman complainer above pleased by the end of the week 'that people were responding in an appropriate way after the fiasco of the Hop Festival' [H2637]. Not everyone agreed that this was 'appropriate' though. The *Herald's* dissident coverage centred around the opposing cultural norm that life should go on as it repeatedly denounced the 'commissars of grief' for their authoritarian efforts to dictate otherwise (1-6.9.1997). Correspondents joined other columnists and letter writers in denouncing the 'fundamentalist zeal' (Littlejohn 1997) with which the mourning was being enforced as 'people should have a

choice' [J931] in whether to grieve or not, as should the royals in how they did so. The basis of such sentiments has indeed also been further strengthened in recent years by a decline in the social policing of how people should grieve in favour of the more tolerant attitude that it is up to each individual to act how they wish. (Walter 1999b). The fact that the inverse views now prevailed - derided by one man as 'Sorry sir/madam, we're having a funeral. England is closed until 2 o'clock' - was seen as 'over the top' [B1426] as well as being deeply intolerant and oppressive. Walter dismisses the latter argument, suggesting that 'this is merely what happens after any death' (1999a: 31). Yet, as noted above, it clearly was not. Indeed a common source of complaint or comment, even among Diana's mourners, were the profoundly atypical levels of respect which bore no relation to the way death was normally treated. They noted the lack of attention given to the driver or Dodi-al-Fayed, or complained that tragedies like this 'happened all the time' to ordinary or quite extraordinary people without life coming to a halt or any respect being shown:

Where my husband works (a food production factory) they are closing from 10am-2am, yet if someone wants four hours off one day to attend their best friend's funeral they will not be allowed it (a problem which regularly arises and causes a lot of ill feeling) [J931].

Similar complaints to a 1989 M-O directive on disasters (No: 28) of 'the different value put on death' [G2701] by a society which 'overdoes the pomp and circumstance of the death of a notable person' [H2269] suggested that such views were hardly new. But Diana's position at the pinnacle of this 'hierarchy of death' (Hattersley 2000) undoubtedly intensified them. For while the above views stemmed from the sharp contrast between communal and privatised expressions of grief, others complained that the extreme level of respect demanded could not be equated with other, more 'worthy' examples of the former. 'As one boy was reported saying to his mother, "They didn't do all this for Dunblane, did they?"' [P2546] Critics noted how sport had been cancelled for Diana but had continued after this disaster and even Hillsborough and Winston Churchill's Saturday morning state funeral (Littlejohn 1997; letter to the *Herald* 6.9.1997). But the contrast was captured most powerfully and bitterly by one older man:

What will happen on November 11<sup>th</sup> - will all shops shut, will all the traffic stop - will people write in books of condolences - will hundreds of thousands of people attend funerals at war memorials? I doubt it - after all November 11<sup>th</sup> is only for the memory of thousands upon thousands who gave their lives in two world wars so that we can enjoy the freedom that they fought for [D2051].

Far from Diana's death contributing to the 'communitas' of the occasion by functioning as 'the great leveller' (Turnock 2000), this suggests it had precisely the opposite effect. For in many ways Diana's mourning was so deviant from the dominant British cultures of grief that it was almost bound to provoke such conflicting and complex responses.

## 5 England's Rose?

This is even more so as closely linked with the subject of grief was another theme which divided popular opinion during the week - nationalism. This is of course inextricably linked with a Royal Family which has for centuries been presented as the symbolic representation of the English/British nation (Billig 1997b; Nairn 1988; Cannadine 1983). While many centre-left commentators were keen to emphasise a Diana's appeal which 'blocked nationalism and fuelled internationalism' (Johnson 1999: 27), the 'imagined community'



(Anderson 1991) of British mourners emphasised daily by the media rather suggested a national framework for the 'united in grief' story. This merely echoed the way past royal events have been presented in popular and academic discourse as evoking a national loyalty which transcended class and other barriers (Shils and Young 1953; Blumer et al 1971; Colley 1992). Others have challenged such interpretations of popular opinion (Birnbaum 1955; Lukes 1975; Taylor 1999), and certainly on this occasion the response in national terms was highly complex as British/English identities drew people both towards and away from the mourning. While many centre-left commentators claimed to detect a new more compassionate type of nationalism on display, in many ways the response in national terms was strikingly traditional. This was particularly evident in the way the funeral stimulated pride that 'there is no doubt that when it comes to unprecedented events like this, Britain organises them brilliantly and with exactly the correct amount of solemnity' [S516]. The popular participation in the mourning as a 'historic event' shows close similarities with the admiration royal ceremonies have always stimulated in a country unique and special, 'the envy of the world'. (Jennings and Madge 1937; Ziegler 1977; Billig 1997b) As this suggests, one key element within this nationalism has always been national pride as we imagine foreigners joining with us to look into 'the enchanted glass' (Nairn 1988) and seeing us, envying us, as unique (Billig 1997b). The media's emphasis of the wider international mourning to a 'people's princess' but ultimately a British princess fitted perfectly into the nationalism stimulated by 'the world's reaction to what was an English girl (ie belonging to our nation)' [P1978]. As one woman put it:

I would imagine that if visitors to this country would have the chance they would all try to be in London to witness this sad occasion and find out what makes us British tick at such a time but will they also understand that this is history at first hand and that they will also be very privileged to witness such an event and to be able to go home equipped to tell everyone that they shared it with us [N399].

And although largely ignored, the theme of nationalism, as much as radicalism was central to the demands of those who questioned why the Royal Family was not in London 'sharing this with the people' [F1634], as a woman from Cardiff put it. But not everyone in the regions was willing to see London as the home of the British nation. As one woman from Glasgow complained: 'Are not the Scots their subjects too? you would have thought they were abroad or something'. She, among others, considered that the mourning was lower key in her country as 'she was after all England's rose not Britain's rose' [R2692] - a judgement also supported by the Scottish home of both the main dissenting newspaper and public institution (see below).

Such sentiments echo previous national variations in which Scotland (and Wales) has always shown greater opposition to royalty (Nairn 1988; Worcester 1997; Taylor 1999). But in a sharp, more general break with the past, the force of nationalism drew people away from the event, the popular images of which marked a serious challenge to the 'imagining' of the British character. This, in death as well as in life, is popularly associated with restraint, reserve, moderation and stability, the polar opposite of 'inferior' countries abroad with their queues, revolutions and emotionalism (Paxman 1999; Billig 1997b). A 1994 M-O directive on 'death' (No.42) had seen observers contrasting an English habit 'to make less of a death than in other countries' with the way people in continental and Arab countries would 'keep up the weeping for several days' [G2134]. But in many ways this was exactly what appeared to be happening in Britain in the course of what an aghast Boris Johnson (1997) described as 'a Latin American carnival of grief'. Observers agreed,

convinced that the 'Evitification' of the country suggested a 'prolonged emotional spasm suffered by the national psyche' [P416]. 'We' were now forced to see ourselves as no longer different from foreigners but just like them. As one woman 'uncomfortable and embarrassed' by 'watching the scenes of public mourning' noted: 'I could imagine it was France, Spain or one of the Latin American countries where uninhibited emotional outbursts are more common' [T2543]. The collapse of these certainties of national identity could be extremely disconcerting: 'As the hours and days passed I gradually felt like an alien in my own country' [S1540], declared one observer, while others were similarly 'horrified and ashamed at the mass hysteria which took over the country' [B2760] or admitted to 'a feeling of relief when the funeral was over and the country got back to normal' [B14256]. Indeed the extreme dis-identification the mourning provoked led some correspondents to equate it with the arch-enemy of all things British, Nazi Germany.

Even those who had been 'immensely distressed' by Diana's death were by no means free from a nationalistic counter-pull as they 'felt uncomfortable with what was almost hysteria. It didn't seem "British"' [N1484]. A 54 year-old woman mourner who had visited London to see the flowers was nevertheless 'not sure' if she agreed with it all: 'In some ways the old English thing of bearing up and keeping a stiff upper lip was preferable. This seems so emotional, far more Mediterranean than British' [R1025]. The way national identity both pushed people towards the mourning yet also potentially alienated them was found in some accounts of the funeral. Pride in the way 'the English did it right as usual' in the dignified ceremony and chilling silence of the crowds was countered momentarily by a distaste at the 'very peculiar, very unBritish' [A883] Mediterranean style wails briefly heard, as well as for the clapping and throwing of flowers. As this demonstrated, identity with the mourning for 'England's Rose' could easily shift into revulsion for a reaction perceived to be more reminiscent of Argentina.

## 6 Tragic News?

Finally, intimately connected with the accounts of Mass-Observers were opinions about media coverage. Some journalists and academics have presented this as a direct reflection of public demand. As the Chief Executive of BBC put it, 'the people led, we followed' (Hall 1997) as the media responded to the spontaneous popular mourning by opening its programmes or pages to 'ordinary' voices. Newspapers printed the 'Moving Stories of Ordinary People Touched by the Queen of Hearts' (*Daily Express* 4.9.1997), while no television story was complete without vox-pops of popular attitudes. Such grassroots pressure ensured a 'diversity of voice ... from all kinds of people, of all ages, ethnicities, sexual orientation and social background' (Hall 1997) and produced a unique reversal in power structures as 'the people spoke and the media reported' (Walter 1999a: 21). Certainly most people seemed to be watching and reading. A record 32 million people saw the funeral, embracing 56 per cent of the entire population or around 62 per cent of adults, while there was a round the board increase in newspaper sales over the week (Greenslade 1997). Contemporary views that British broadcasters had 'passed the sternest of tests' (Snood 1997) appeared confirmed by a BBC poll which found that 75 per cent considered its approach to have been 'just right' while only 22 per cent criticised it as excessive (Barnard 1997).

The only thing lacking in such coverage, according to critics, was a diversity of opinion as the media 'turned itself into ... a machinery for positive reinforcement' which excluded 'another Britain' which was 'almost certainly much bigger than anyone was allowed to know' (Hitchens 1998). Such a critique links with arguments that media 'disaster marathon' style coverage threatens the democratic process by prioritising the unrepresentative opinion of 'people who scream the most ... the louder the less controlled the better'. (Liebes 1998: 80) More directly, other statistical evidence suggests a degree of public hostility. An astonishing 98 per cent of responses to BBC radio 4's audience 'Feedback' programme considered there to have been too much coverage, a 'people-power' critique which the corporation duly responded to by taking the programme off air (Byrne 1997). A greater impact was, however, made by hundreds of viewer complaints that forced television to renew normal broadcasting on the Sunday of Diana's death (Lawson 1997). Moving beyond such competing arguments, the BFI's survey of popular reactions suggests a more complex picture. While the majority of its 275 respondents considered the coverage excessive, increasingly so as the week went on, many at the same time were drawn to the screen or found it impossible to turn away. (Turnock 2000).

M-O's evidence reveals a similar ambivalence. Again there were polarities of opinion. One woman greeted her daughter with the words: 'Bloody cowing rotten lousy stinking bloody lousy Princess bloody cowing sodding Diana's dead and they've took everything off for the cow' [quoted in P1730]. Others, however, had nothing but praise for coverage which 'throughout the week was excellent' [B89] and from which they found it 'very difficult to move away from' [B1386]. Often a complex combination of the two sentiments was present. On the day of the news there was initial fascination with the coverage, to be quickly followed by boredom with a story in which there was little more to say and was just being spun out. As one woman noted with reference to the 'constant updating', 'She was dead in the morning and remained dead in the afternoon' [B2258]. Such sentiments sometimes extended to all shades of opinion. One man signed the book of condolence and sent a letter to Prince Charles but also phoned BBC Bristol to complain about excessive coverage and praised *Private Eye* as 'one of the few publications to retain its sense of proportion in the orgy of mourning' [L1477]. Complaints over the volume of coverage were allied to increasing hostility to the tone of 'almost instantaneous canonisation' of Diana, 'a mixture like all of us' [B2258]. As one male observer argued:

The nation has been subjected, systematically, to a continuous barrage of sanctimonious, grovelling, posthumous adoration of the late – and in my view –unremarkable – Princess of Wales ... It was as if there was nothing else happening in the rest of the world. If a stray asteroid had wiped Australia off the face of the Earth, it might, just, have made page 14 of the Times or the Telegraph somewhere at the bottom and may have got a brief mention at the end of a specially extended edition of the nine o'clock news [B2785].

Such a response is again nothing new, judging from M-O's reports of 'resentment' about radio coverage which had 'all been overdone' following the death of George VI (M-OA TC 14). Yet while media coverage may have repulsed, it also fascinated and again in common with earlier M-O surveys of royal events (Jennings and Madge 1937; Ziegler 1978), people were drawn in despite themselves by what one observer called the 'cliff-hanging serial drama' [A2464] of the week. A retired biologist from Essex best captured this ambivalence. Despite believing that 'Diana's lifestyle killed her' and being 'appalled at the public's response'

and the 'rankest hypocrisy' of press coverage, he nevertheless declared: 'As the week developed I was mesmerised by the reportage, even while it made me squirm with embarrassment. I felt compelled to watch it as a rabbit watches a snake' [M2164]. This fascination peaked on the day of the funeral, which was watched or listened to by many of those who had strongly complained about the earlier coverage or declared themselves unmoved or hostile during the week. Motives ranged from paying respect to enjoying the entertainment derived, to update Byron, from the public spectacle of a celebrity gladiator 'butchered to make a roman holiday' (Webster's Dictionary 1965: 773; Turnock 2000) in the media amphitheatre. As one man wrote:

The slow gathering of the congregation, with its mixture of royalty, the political establishment and show-business had something of the air of a Royal command performance or an even more popular entertainment event. Who was it under that wide-brimmed hat, or stuffed into an unfamiliar suit? Who was going to sit next to her. Cherie Blair defiantly hatless. Good for her! [L2393]

## **7 Breaking the Spiral**

This paper has provided merely a cursory introduction to the complex attitudes of Mass-Observers to Diana's mourning. Much has been overlooked, notably issues of media power and resistance. But even from the above evidence, it is abundantly clear that they were very far from being 'united in grief'. On the contrary, opinions were both divided and polarised across a range of themes, but also composed of complex, contradictory and ambivalent responses. While existing literature has juxtaposed the responses of 'mourners' against 'dissenters', this reveals a complex popular reaction which was sometimes neither or both. Just as in the second world war Tom Harrisson argued that it was not possible to talk of a single 'national morale' as there were 45 million 'national morales' (Richards and Sheridan 1987), so this evidence suggests the same can be said about popular reactions on this occasion. Such a point, however, returns the issue to the thorny question of the representative nature of M-O material and its broader value.

There is, of course, no unproblematic window to popular opinion – despite the habit of opinion polls and the media in presenting themselves as such - and the issue of what is representative is in part a relative one. In this case M-O arguably provides a more accurate, if far from perfect, picture of popular attitudes than any other source. The depth, sophistication and diversity of its evidence certainly compares favourably with overwhelmingly one-dimensional media reporting. This is true collectively but also applies to the measured balance of individual accounts, which were often given further depth as friends, colleagues and families were given space to compete with and often contradict the writer (Sheridan 1993). While this cannot (and does not) seek to answer exactly how many mourned, the same is also true of journalists just as self-selecting (Noakes 1998) and rather more unrepresentative in their background than the 'ordinary' people who act as Mass-Observers (Barton et al 1993; Bloome et al 1993). On this occasion, the media's questionable solution to their 'representative' problem was to rely on 'a blatantly self-selecting sample of Diana admirers' (Smith 1997) (or those whose opinion was presented as such) to confidently determine the national mood - a process one critic described as 'about as objective as an opinion poll at a party conference' (letter to the *Times* 13.9.1997). Against this, it would be somewhat perverse to suggest that M-O's more diverse, richer and complex picture of reactions was less representative of wider attitudes. More

positively, as this paper has demonstrated, it is significant that its conclusions are consistent with a range of other evidence, both in relation to Diana's mourning and more broadly. Ultimately analyses of popular opinion deal in the balance of probabilities. In this case it seems highly plausible that Diana's complex life and death should have produced such contrasting responses from a heterogeneous public, composed of distinct and contradictory individual and collective identities - to say nothing of the range of views that the extraordinary events of the mourning stimulated. What is perhaps surprising is not that the country was divided in grief but the widespread assumption of the reverse perspective.

As for how this evidence compares with opinion polls, one answer is that there is no competition - which is also true in another sense given the frustratingly limited polling evidence of Diana's mourning (Worcester 1997). The M-OA's material provides a qualitative complement which illuminates the reasons why some mourned as well as the rather more neglected questions of why others did not or only partially did so. As this suggests, in doing so it frequently uncovers responses that are simply not open to or even appropriate for quantification, a point which more directly raises the question of the competing validity of quantitative or qualitative analyses. While the view that 'the construction of theorizing ... and meaning in its real complexity is unquantifiable' is not 'fact' as McGuigan claims (1997: 9) but opinion, its truth is difficult to deny when seeking to explore popular, emotional reactions which are very difficult to reduce to hard polling categorisations. A detailed exploration of attitudes to Diana, media coverage and the mourning can certainly be strengthened by relevant quantitative evidence, but must ultimately be placed within a qualitative approach.

Given the homogenisation of the popular response into one simple 'united in grief' mythology, M-O is also useful, to paraphrase E. P. Thompson, in rescuing the non-mourning 'losers' from 'the enormous condescension of posterity' (1991: 12) - while also restoring the individuality and subtlety to the reactions of some of the 'winners'. For one of the ironies of Diana's death is that, contrary to appearances, existing hierarchies of knowledge were overwhelmingly strengthened. This is true of a media whose 'naturalised authority ... to present social actuality', to define who 'the people' were and what they thought, was 'massively reproduced' (Couldry 1999: 79) in the course of its marathon coverage. Equally, the 'naturalised authority' of academia has been no less powerfully reinforced by the subsequent outpouring of analysis, overwhelmingly from the deconstructionist field of cultural studies, which has interpreted from above the popular meaning of the Diana 'text' but has sought little engagement with attitudes on the ground in doing so. The way the Archive (and hopefully this paper) positions M-O writers not only as objects of study for research 'on' but as active participants in research 'for and with' as well (Sheridan 1998), facilitates a suitably more collaborative, democratic 'people's history' (Thomas 2002) of the mourning. Since its foundation M-O has embraced a less élitist definition of who has the expertise and legitimacy to write and represent the views of others and themselves (Sheridan, Street and Bloome 2000). This 'magnificent subversion of authority', as Pocock called it (1987: 415), not only provides 'ivory tower academics' with a much needed 'reality check' on their assumptions (Weeks 2000: 7), but nudges power relations back towards 'ordinary' people in the 'credibility struggles' (Epstein 1996) over who has the authority to speak. And its result on this occasion enables a valuable alternative, complementary – arguably in some ways a

more 'credible' – collective history to be heard. On another level this alternative approach must be positioned within, and is bolstered by, by the recent ethnographic turn (Ferguson and Golding 1997) within cultural studies and a growing discontent with the dominant textualist form of analysis. Yet while, as Hall notes, 'textuality is not enough' (quoted in Morley 1997: 123), particularly when assessing popular attitudes to the Diana events, neither, as analysts of media power protest, is ethnography adequate on its own (Morley 1997). As this paper briefly and incompletely attempts, both text and reception are essential, placed within their historical, social and cultural contexts, for a more comprehensive, multiperspectival (Kellner 1997) examination of the Diana events.

The value of the M-OP's evidence is undoubtedly enhanced when positioned within this broader context. Yet alone, its more democratic view from below also calls into question the dominant assumption that a week of 'people power' ensured that far from being hidden from history, ordinary people emerged 'with a vengeance' (Braidotti 1997: 1) to have their say. While some certainly did, other voices were not only hidden but well and truly 'buried under a large monolith called GRIEF' (Jack 1997: 17). A number of dissident accounts (and Mass-Observers) expressed their puzzlement at the divergence between the views attributed to the public and those they encountered in private (Smith 1997; Wilson 1998). The reason for this was a 'spiral of silence' (Noelle-Neumann 1993) of dissenting opinions following Diana's death. As Abrams notes (1997), numerous studies in social psychology have discovered that people will publicly conform to perceived social norms, tending to conceal views if they feel they are in a minority and more willing to express them if they consider their views dominant. This can produce a spiralling process, resulting in the apparently dominant opinion monopolising the public scene while others disappear from view as supporters, fearing isolation, become mute.

This is exactly what happened in September 1997, a period of 'liminality' which saw everyone initially unsure of how to act and learning from others and the media about what was acceptable social behaviour (Walter 1999a). Indeed at the outset mourners were reluctant to publicly express their feelings for fear of social isolation and mockery of their disproportionate feelings for a stranger. One 48 year-old woman from Cheshire heard the news on the radio while driving to the swimming pool:

I began to cry quite spontaneously and without warning – I surprised myself that I could react so immediately and unselfconsciously. I must go back home. But they might think I was overreacting a bit ... Others might think it strange that I could cry about something so far off [T1843].

She drove on to the pool where she met two friends who were not upset and 'felt very alone, as though my reaction was quite uncalled for'. But very quickly the media, backed socially by those who shared such feelings, legitimised this reaction – indeed behaved 'as if any other response might get you put in jail' (Pearson 1997). 'I was pleased because I wasn't alone. My reaction hadn't been isolated', noted the above woman after returning to her upset family and watching television. [T1843]. Meanwhile social traditions of respect for the dead and those upset alongside fear of the intolerance of the living emerged to ensure that favourable sentiments were disproportionately emphasised while unflattering or even mixed opinions were largely silenced. As one sceptic, referring to a comment from her window cleaner about a 'sad, sad week', noted: 'I was even more careful not to state the views I had as I certainly wouldn't want to offend anyone

who felt strongly about it' [W2224]. Such 'respect' meant a divergence between what was publicly expressed and privately thought. Some journalists subsequently admitted to self-censorship for fear of 'appearing unpatriotic, unfeeling or tasteless' (Kington 1997), while even sceptics who wrote recorded how colleagues had advised them not to (Ferguson 1997; Shields 1997) – and most only did so, notably, after the funeral.

But the darker side of this expectation of respect was intolerance towards those who failed to show it. By the 1980s the old taboo against attacking the royal family had spectacularly broken down but within hours of Diana's death 'a new one seemed to have sprung up around the monarchy's renegade daughter' (Nairn 1999: 223-4). Those who even much later offered critical perspectives on Diana's life (Junor 1998) or mourning (Jack 1997) received the hate mail, press abuse and physical threat (Dodd 1998) that critics of royalty like Lord Altrincham and Willie Hamilton had once suffered (Ziegler 1978; Nairn 1988; Pimlott 1997). Nearly a year after Diana's death, the limits of acceptable opinion was demonstrated by the outraged public response to Anthony O'Hear's rather mild attack on a woman who 'did quite a lot of good' but who also embodied a 'childlike self-centredness' (1998: 186-88). Tony Blair, backed up by tabloid attacks on the 'poisonous professor ... a rat-faced loser' (Parsons 1998), felt obliged to interrupt an important diplomatic tour of the Middle East to attack the 'snobbery' of an eight page article written by an unknown academic (Wheen 1998).

This offered merely a pale imitation of the authoritarianism of September 1997 which saw critics complaining of 'a kind of floral fascism' in 'a country patrolled by the grief police' (Jack, 1997: 18), and manifested in verbal and even physical attacks on the mildest form of dissent. When the Scottish Football Association scheduled an international football match to begin three hours after the funeral, complete with black armbands and a minute's silence, one could have mistaken that they had somehow engineered Diana's death themselves such was the fury their 'GAME OF SHAME' (*Daily Mirror* 4.9.1997) provoked. Virulent tabloid assaults on the SFA chief executive Jim Farry, from whom 'a lifetime's silence ... might just satisfy an outraged public', were accompanied by a prime ministerial denunciation of such 'inappropriate' behaviour (*Daily Mail* 5.9.1997). Meanwhile the Cheshire woman who had been so reluctant to express her views on the Sunday was rather more confident in doing so, to the point of intolerance by the following day after seeing her reaction shared with – and now supported by - 'so many others'.

On Monday night we talked about her in the pub after choir. One friend remained silent and I remember how dismissive he had been about our reading of Andrew Morton's book, decrying all royals and monarchists. As we eulogised he looked more and more pained until I asked him what he was thinking. He had not been moved, and neither had his work colleagues, by the death of such a deceitful, manipulating, spoilt brat. And, speaking directly to me, he did not comprehend how any rational, intelligent person could possibly think otherwise. I couldn't let her take that and I went for him verbally. I felt sorry for him, I said, really sorry if he failed to see what so many others had seen ... There was a silence as we stared at each other. A man next to me whispered "we're right with you". [T1843]

Such 'aggressive reactions to criticisms' led non-mourners to choose 'not to voice their opinions further' [W1813] as they 'began to feel intimidated. I have heard people say they did not like to be the first to say how exaggerated the whole thing was, how unreal and even frightening' [H2410]. Their subsequent isolation meant that, as one observer put it: 'I did not express my views in public for I realised that I was a lone voice'

[W1457]. Such was the pressure not to go 'against the moral consensus' [O2349] that actions as well as words were felt to be deviant. As one arch-sceptic put it: 'I once crossed London Bridge in the rush hour, when everyone was going the other way and I felt WRONG!' [G1041]. The result was a retreat of opinion into the private sphere in a pattern more reminiscent of life under dictatorship (Peukert 1989). Indeed such isolation penetrated even into this area as others found themselves 'profoundly uneasy' [C602] and wondering if there was 'something wrong' with them [B2785] for being so 'callously lacking' in grief [J2187]. Such intense conformist pressure also raises serious questions about the accuracy of *public* opinion polls in charting attitudes. In this climate, perhaps what is surprising is not that 94 per cent of a poll declared themselves to have a favourable view of Princess Diana, but that 6 per cent were willing to confess publicly to a stranger that they had negative feelings. Nor is the discrepancy between the 90 per cent of adults who told Mori that they had watched the funeral with the more authoritative industry figure of 62 per cent hard to understand. It is also notable that the numbers who said that they *would* sign the book of condolences or place flowers were almost as large as the proportion *claiming* that they had (Worcester 1997). While references to the 'very sad news' replaced talk of the weather as the emotional script to be followed in public after Diana's death, this also functioned as a mourning veil that hid a range of complex, different opinions.

The M-OA material not only helps illuminate this situation but also offers one of the few means to penetrate such a powerful spiral to offer a deeper insight into attitudes. As one observer commented: 'I ... feel that if I had said to anybody what I have written here, last week, I would have been made to feel callous and cruel' [H1709]. It also led another to seek to 'correct a subject that could be misconstrued in the future – having only one side talked about – which was coverage by the media – and not what quite a lot of people thought but did not say at the time' [H277]. The unique characteristics of the Archive - its position at the intersection of the private and public spheres, the relationship of trust and mutuality with long-term volunteers, the condition of anonymity and the undirected, unstructured request for views – all allow for a more intimate and spontaneous picture of popular attitudes. And because conformist pressures disappear when responses are written down (McIlven and Gross 1999), the Archive provides access to 'a part of the truth unrecorded anywhere else in the country' (Sheridan and Pocock 1985) during the mourning and unreachable through quantitative surveys, or even through qualitative group discussions.

This was captured by one woman, who was 'glad' of the opportunity to write to the Archive after a week which had left her 'quite concerned' by a reaction that had left her feeling 'quite isolated' and 'completely out of step with the majority' [T2003]. For others, loyalty to the archive or their strong feelings towards or against the mourning meant that they had already written before receiving the directive. In many ways, of course, the act of writing can not be separated from what people wrote (Sheridan et al 2000). For some its production was an active part of mourning, as they supplemented their accounts with poems, decorative stamps or details of written or pictorial tributes that they had offered. One woman finished her account: 'Whoever reads this, I want you to know that I am crying for her now, but that it is one of the greatest honours I have had to be able to write for history here' [B1120]. For sceptics, their contribution could be an active form of resistance and empowerment in the face of the hegemonic mood. One observer announced



that he was writing instead of watching a funeral which had 'nothing whatever to do' with him [B2785], while another prefaced her contribution with the expressed determination 'to set the following on record so that the future doesn't think everyone in Britain was round the bloody twist' [P1730]. M-O, perhaps uniquely in September 1997, emerges as both a mourning and non-mourning site, providing a forum for the passions of both sides while also catering for those caught somewhere in the middle.

Such a role fits almost perfectly with the original purpose of Mass-Observation. In 1937 the organisation had been founded out of a democratic 'need to know' (Jefferys 1999), which was being hindered by misrepresentation of popular attitudes by a press which as the self-appointed 'representatives of the people', found it necessary 'to pretend that its *own opinion* is public opinion' (Harrisson 1940: 376-7). M-O sought to close this gap between published and public opinion and challenge the assumption that the press could genuinely represent the public (Sheridan, Street and Bloome 2000). It was further concerned with the way knowledge about popular attitudes was hindered by exactly the 'spiral' noted above. Indeed it was Harrisson who first identified this very divergence between public and private opinion (Splichal 2000), as people tended, as at the Munich crisis, to voice attitudes which were 'generally acceptable and respectable', while hostile reactions, lacking social and media sanction, retreated into privacy (Harrisson 1940: 370-72). M-O aimed to penetrate this process and accurately illuminate not only the top-layer of people's opinion, what they were prepared to say in public, but also their deeper 'real' attitudes - those offered in private to trusted friends or even merely thought. Sixty years after its foundation, the events of September 1997 once more demonstrated M-O's continuing ability and value in doing this. For without it, the complex range of popular attitudes revealed by its observers would have remained hidden beneath the mourning veil.

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