

How the Princess of Wales Became the Royals' Not-So-Secret Weapon: The Kate Effect [C2]

Nonostante le critiche iniziali che la consideravano un manichino senza personalità, la principessa del Galles Kate Middleton ha conquistato il favore del pubblico ed è diventata un punto fermo della famiglia reale.



On a [chilly](#) day back in January, one of the most recognisable women in the world [plunged into](#) a surprised crowd of shoppers in Leeds's Victorian market. The Princess of Wales [obligingly fielded](#) requests for selfies, including with a man so [flustered](#) by encountering royalty he could [barely](#) get the words out. (She [reassured](#) him gently that “We all get nervous”, though if she still does after more than a decade of this, it doesn't show.) But after shaking some hands and chatting to [traders](#), she moved on to the University of Leeds for what was [arguably](#) the heart of the day. The princess, promoting her new project on how the first five years affect children's life [chances](#), attended a [lecture](#) on child psychology and

afterwards talked to students on the childhood studies course about their dissertations. “It makes me want to be back at uni,” she told them. “Everyone says it’s never too late.”

THE BODY POLITIC

It’s a decade now since the late novelist Hilary Mantel described the then Duchess of Cambridge as a “[jointed doll](#) on which certain [rags are hung](#)”, almost too [smooth](#) and plastic to be real. She was, Mantel wrote in a long essay on the royal body politic through the ages, “as painfully thin as anyone could wish, without [quirks](#), without [oddities](#), without the risk of the emergence of character”. The [vitriol](#) of the [backlash](#) against Mantel may partly explain why few would say such things now — but only partly. At forty-two, the Princess once [dismissed](#) by some as a glorified [clothes horse](#) is emerging as a more substantial figure on whom a monarchy [rocked](#) by scandal elsewhere can increasingly [rely](#). It has been, as royal evolutions are, a slow process. When she married her prince at twenty-nine, the then Kate Middleton chose a [gilded](#) but perilously [narrow](#) path. She must be just interesting enough to feed the media beast, but never so interesting as to be divisive. She can’t have a career in the conventional sense, but also can’t be seen to do nothing with her days. She can compete [playfully](#) with her husband at things that don’t matter, like spin bike challenges in Welsh leisure centres, but not eclipse him. It’s a life too luxurious to be described as hard, but the history of royal spouses — from a [wronged](#) Diana to a once-vilified Camilla, and lately Meghan saying she has had suicidal thoughts — suggests it isn’t easy, either. If she has ever struggled, she hasn’t complained. Her uncle Gary Goldsmith once described her as “self-sufficient, [resourceful](#) and extremely capable. She comes from a family of [doers and fixers](#) ... Carole [Middleton, her mother] has taught her girls to deal with problems with calm capability.” She has the kind of resilience often learned in [boarding school](#), characterised by tight control over one’s feelings, but without appearing [chilly](#) or remote. (Despite her best efforts to get people to call her Catherine, the friendlier Kate has inexorably [stuck](#).) She found her niche in the family as a sporty mother of three always [game for](#) [wholesome](#) outdoor activity, from training with the Irish Guards in the snow to toasting marshmallows round a scout campfire. It feels authentic (a family friend once reportedly described her wanting nothing more from life than lots of kids, a house in the country and dogs), and by January it had made her the second most popular living royal after Princess Anne, according to a [poll](#). She has the kind of soft power politicians would kill for and if some still find it all rather [bland](#), criticism tends to magically [slide](#) off her. “She’s popular, but more importantly she’s not unpopular,” says Victoria Murphy, a contributing editor for Town and Country magazine, who has covered the royals since the year William and Kate got engaged. “She has this approach which is very similar to the one Queen Elizabeth had — we feel that we know her a bit, that we’ve seen the real her, but she’s still something of an enigma. We don’t know a huge amount.” “When she started, she was very nervous and

very [keen](#) to listen to what people felt she should be doing. Over time, she's become more confident in taking that lead herself, but I still think it's always been in a very quiet way," says Murphy. To understand her [unfolding](#) strategy, you have to [turn the clock back](#) five years from that morning in Leeds.

THOUGHTS ON CHILDHOOD

The then Duchess of Cambridge was heavily pregnant with her third child, Louis, when she first convened a [steering group](#) to examine how children's life [chances](#) could be improved by intervening more effectively in their earliest years. The eventual result was the Royal Foundation Centre for Early Childhood, which she launched in 2021. It aims to support but never judge parents, [distilling](#) neuroscientific research into practical advice they can use from pregnancy through to children starting school. But beneath this project lies an [agenda](#) the princess is said to consider the social equivalent of the climate crisis: joining the dots between childhood experiences and later life addiction, family breakdown, mental health problems and homelessness. She has done her homework — visiting schools in Denmark, talking to child development experts at Harvard University, [polling](#) parents — and in 2020 gently [rebuffed](#) the idea there was something "[mumsy](#)" about it all, arguing that to assume she was interested just because she had children "ultimately [sells the issue short](#)." Those who have worked alongside her don't doubt her seriousness.

AN INFLUENCER

The princess's own childhood, growing up in the Berkshire [commuter belt](#) village of Bucklebury, was by all accounts happy, and she has talked of raising her three children the same way, with lots of [muddy](#) outdoor play, competitive sport and [crafts](#). (The [Waleses](#) employ a nanny but are [hands-on](#) by royal standards, clearing their diaries for school holidays.) It was at Marlborough College that Kate is first said to have befriended girls who moved in royal circles. There has long been speculation (and denial) that her last-minute decision to take a [gap year](#) and switch from Edinburgh University to St. Andrews, putting her on the same history of art course as William, was not entirely [rely](#) coincidental. For their engagement photocall, Kate wore a blue Issa dress that sold out across multiple countries in twenty-four hours. It was an early [harbinger](#) of the so-called "Kate effect", which made her an influencer before the term existed, and which Newsweek recently estimated is worth £1bn annually to the fashion industry.

THE ROYAL IDENTITY

Harry's dramatic departure from the royal stage, the scandal [engulfing](#) Prince Andrew, and the death of the Queen have all posed strategic threats to support for

the monarchy, and a [poll](#) for the BBC in April found [barely](#) a third of under-twenty-fours and slightly less than half of all twenty-five- to forty-nine-year-olds now favour its continued existence. [Dragging](#) the Windsors into the 21st century is, of course, far from solely Kate's responsibility. But the nearer her husband [draws](#) to the throne, the more she will be expected to embody an [acutely-contested](#) sense of British national identity, alongside a [jumble](#) of conflicted beliefs about motherhood and family life. The [stakes could not be higher](#), in a country where enthusiasm for the monarchy has been gently but steadily declining since 2019, and in years to come the pressures may be intense. When Michael Middleton designed a family [coat of arms](#) before the royal wedding, he chose three [acorns](#) to symbolise his children, representing the [oak trees](#) growing around the family home. Like those trees, Kate must hope she is now [sturdy](#) enough to weather a storm." Published in The Guardian on May 6, 2023. Reprinted with permission.

Glossary

- **backlash** = reazione negativa
- **wholesome** = salutare
- **distilling** = sintetizzare
- **rebuffed** = respingere
- **muddy** = infangato
- **sturdy** = robusta
- **fielded** = rispondere
- **rocked** = scuotere
- **keen** = desiderosa di
- **steering group** = gruppo direttivo
- **lecture** = conferenza
- **resourceful** = pieno di risorse
- **crafts** = lavori manuali
- **arguably** = probabilmente
- **quirks** = particolarità
- **gilded** = dorato
- **Waleses** = i principi del Galles
- **oak trees** = querce
- **slide** = scivolare
- **unfolding** = spiegarsi
- **jumble** = miscuglio
- **coat of arms** = stemma
- **hands-on** = effettivi
- **gap year** = anno sabbatico
- **flustered** = agitato
- **smooth** = delicata
- **vitriol** = veleno (acido)
- **boarding school** = collegio, convitto
- **stuck** = fissare
- **mumsy** = materno
- **poll** = sondaggio
- **acorns** = ghiandole
- **dismissed** = respingere
- **playfully** = allegramente
- **sells the issue short** = sminuire
- **commuter belt** = periferia
- **plunged into** = immergersi
- **game for** = disposta
- **are hung** = appendere
- **narrow** = stretto

- **doers and fixers** = imprenditori e conquistatori
- **engulfing** = travolgere
- **chances** = possibilità
- **traders** = commercianti
- **rags** = stracci
- **to turn the clock back** = tornare indietro
- **reassured** = rassicurare
- **clothes horse** = stendipanni
- **acutely-contested** = molto discusso
- **stakes could not be higher** = la posta in gioco non potrebbe essere più alta
- **obligingly** = gentilmente
- **jointed doll** = bambola snodata
- **rely** = contare su
- **bland** = insipido
- **chilly** = fresca
- **wronged** = fare del male
- **harbinger** = segnale
- **draws** = avvicinarsi
- **oddities** = stranezze
- **agenda** = obiettivi
- **Dragging** = trascinare