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Why Kate Middleton brings out the worst in us

She’s been accused of social climbing, of having no class and of being “boring”. But we are at fault

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If there is one person I wouldn't want to be in 2011, it is Kate Middleton. She gets her face put on a coin and everyone says she looks like a pig; she spends Christmas with her family and there are suggestions Prince William has snubbed her. Even her invitation to join the royal family for a pre-Christmas lunch provoked comments such as this one, from "Seila" on the *Daily Mail* website: "I don't like Kate Middleton one bit! She is a gold-digging hanger-on! Her wait certainly paid off for her! William could and should have been advised to choose someone better!" Beneath the message is an invitation to "report abuse" in any posted comments. In the circumstances, that seems unnecessary.

Or here is “j.c.k.” in New York: “Prince Harry is the only one with charisma, it was evident when he visited New York. Harry is a sweetheart, but I can’t warm to manipulative Kate. Kate chased William until she got him. I believe he simply got tired of being henpecked by her . . . Wait until after the wedding, when William finds out who the ‘real Kate’ is.”

Middleton might not quite face the trials beckoning Julian Assange this year, but she could suffer instead a peculiarly British type of hell: trapped in palaces under the relentless scrutiny of the media, open to the strange fury of all the crazy women who post comments on the Mail’s website and elsewhere complaining that she isn’t Diana, she doesn’t have blonde hair, she isn’t posh enough. She’s middle-class, she is plain, she is dull, she is “nouveau”. Her mum was an air hostess, don’t you know?

Snare the heir

I have been reading – yes, really reading – the biography of Kate Middleton written by the journalist Claudia Joseph. It drips with snobbish innuendo and occasionally with downright insult: from the careful recording (twice) of how Kate and her sister were known in posh circles as the “wisteria sisters” – “highly decorative, terribly fragrant and with a ferocious ability to climb” – to observations that the Middleton house was in fact clad in “climbing vines and wisteria”, or that Kate performed the stage role of Eliza Doolittle in *My Fair Lady* aged ten, and the careful noting (twice) that she was good at high jump during her time at school.

This theme of the woman intent on social climbing runs through what is, in parts at least, a well-researched history. One branch of the Middleton family hails from a wealthy professional background near Leeds. Note, however, that her great-great-great-grandmother was “a young woman who seems to have been determined to make something of herself”, marrying her “social better”.

Men in the family history who marry “up”, by contrast – such as Kate’s paternal great-grandfather who married an heiress – face no such disapproval in this biography. Instead, the great-grandfather and his wealthy bride are “bound together” by their common experience of family tragedy . . . apparently.

Particular disdain throughout is reserved for Kate’s maternal grandmother, Dorothy, who “always thought she was one above everybody else”, who was poor but “a bit of a snob” and who “thought she was too good for the rest of us”, according to an envious relative called Ann who comes out by far the worst in this account.

Poor Kate. The narrative of her marriage to Prince William has been decided even before she chooses her dress – a grasping, social-climbing, middle-class girl who happens to have snared the heir to the British throne, or “Waity Katie”, as commenters on the Mail’s website call her. The Middleton family goes on holiday at an exclusive resort in Barbados “but interestingly they would go at the beginning of the season . . . when it is cheaper”, notes a family “friend” to Claudia Joseph.

There is an alternative narrative. The Middletons’ background is a potted social history of Britain, from the north-east mining stock on Kate’s mother’s side – families riven by poverty, war and disease – to the prosperous professional middle classes on her father’s side. Then it’s on to Kate’s mother, Carole, the commercial air stewardess at a time when cheap flight was just beginning to take off, and thence to the internet-enabled success of Carole’s party planning business, and on to Kate herself, the slightly duller product of southern England and a private school. I was a lot more interested in Kate after I’d read the book.

Quick verdict

Opinion polls show that enthusiasm for the Kate and William wedding is floundering already, a ComRes survey reporting that nearly two-thirds of British people are either “largely indifferent” or “couldn’t care less”. Another poll found that more than eight in ten of us were “a little interested” at most. Given that the “most exciting” event of all – the engagement and That Ring – has passed, it does not bode well for the couple’s popularity in the next few months.

Middleton will get blamed, unfairly, for not being glamorous or exciting enough. I'd say she's fascinating. Whatever trials Diana had to deal with as a newly minted princess, blogs and internet commenters weren't among them. These have made it possible for the public to express their worst and nastiest side, as Middleton is discovering. After she "braved the snow" in black suede boots early in December, no fewer than 302 comments appeared beneath the *Mail*’s online story about her podiatric fashion.

Among them, my favourite exchange: “God forbid that she is judged by her boots and how many times she wears them,” said a reader. To which another responded: “Yes it is sad but unfortunately there is nothing interesting or nice to say about this lazy and scheming woman.” (So it obviously didn’t occur to this person that she had the option of saying nothing.)

Poor Kate Middleton. How poor of us. Happy Nouveau Year.



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This article first appeared in the 03 January 2011 issue of the New Statesman, *The siege of Gaza*

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