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Inheriting a dynasty: Family succession dramas and the moral economy of *Downton Abbey*

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Abstract

The role of inherited or family wealth in reproducing and even exacerbating wealth inequalities has been addressed in various studies in recent years. Bringing together representation studies with studies on cultural and moral economies, this article analyses how cultural norms indispensable to the preservation of dynastic wealth are negotiated through contemporary popular culture and television series. It introduces the concept of family succession drama, referring to television fiction that focuses on issues concerning intergenerational transmission of wealth and/or privileges and analyses the series Downton Abbey as a case study for interrogating the ambiguous affirmation of inherited wealth and dynastic privileges in a historical melodrama. By focusing on *Downton Abbey*, the article considers how hereditary rights and dynastic privileges are negotiated in a heritage drama in ways that also enable the legitimation of contemporary dynasty-making. While acknowledging the anxieties caused by class differences, *Downton Abbey* nevertheless affirms the necessity for various hereditary privileges and fortunes, thereby excluding any true alternatives for (contemporary) dynastic dynamics.

Keywords

Dynasties, elites, family succession drama, family wealth, inheritance, moral economy, popular culture, privilege, representation, television series

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Introduction

Intergenerational and dynastic transmission of wealth, power and privilege have been recurrent themes among the most popular, award-winning television drama series of the last two decades. From the fantasy hit series *Game of Thrones* and the repulsive satire *Succession*, to widely-acclaimed period dramas such as *Downton Abbey* and *The Crown*, several recent series have been preoccupied with questions of dynastic succession and the preparation of children for hereditary privileges. These popular dramas portray the transmission of dynastic privileges and inheritances as problematic and precarious, if not outright violent, processes centred on colourful family dynamics, genealogy and families' challenges in controlling the hereditary cycles.

The popularity of such television series coincides with vivid real-life debates on wealth concentration at the top and on capital accumulation processes in which family legacies play an important role. Not only have economists shown the enduring, and perhaps increasing, significance of inherited wealth for economic and social inequalities (Piketty, 2014), but social scientists have also shown rekindled interest in the complicated mechanisms of dynastic reproduction among elite families (for an overview, see Beckert, 2022).

The popularity of television dramas focusing on family succession thus coincides with the increased socio-economic significance of inherited wealth and dynastic privileges and new anxieties around them. Consequently, such television series, which I call *family succession dramas*, have an important, albeit ambiguous, function in the contemporary ideological and cultural milieu, characterised by a deepening conflict between two value systems, those of the 'domestic' and family oriented and of the 'civic will' of meritocracy (Moor and Friedman, 2021).

By family succession dramas, I refer to television fiction that focuses on the intergenerational transmission of wealth and/or privilege within families and often on the upbringing of children to assume their privileged status. The habitually conflict- and anxiety-ridden representations confer upon the word drama a dual function, referring to both the art form and the emotional content on which such series draw. I argue that family succession dramas constitute a thematic genre that can take different forms and have various articulations, for example depending on the stylistic genre of each production.

In this article, I analyse the series *Downton Abbey* as a case study for interrogating the affirmation of dynastic privileges and inherited wealth in a family succession melodrama that is located in the historical past. Bringing together representation studies with studies on cultural and moral economies, the article analyses how – in the case of *Downton Abbey* – the cultural norms indispensable for the preservation of dynastic wealth are negotiated through historical melodrama or heritage drama. As a feel-good drama, *Downton Abbey* represents the benevolent dimensions of family dynasties. In this way, it greatly differs from some of the bleak variants of the family succession drama genre. Such darker examples of the genre include, for example the satire *Succession*, the kidnapping drama *Trust* and the neo-Western *Yellowstone* – all of which contribute to the construction of moral norms concerning dynasties quite differently from the melodramatic *Downton Abbey*.

The article, thus, examines one melodramatic variant of family succession dramas by analysing how dynastic wealth perpetuation is mediated in *Downton Abbey* and how

– despite its historical milieu – its moral economy may also support contemporary forms of dynasty-making. By taking *Downton Abbey* as a case study, this article considers how hereditary rights are negotiated in the *fictional past* in ways that also enable the legitimation of *contemporary* dynasties. I argue that while acknowledging the anxieties caused by class differences, *Downton Abbey* nevertheless justifies the need and rights for hereditary privileges, thereby excluding any true alternatives for (contemporary) dynastic dynamics.

So far, *Downton Abbey* has mainly been analysed from the perspectives of nationhood, gender, historiography and social order (Baena and Byker, 2015; Byrne, 2015; Copelman, 2019; Gullace, 2019) – all topics important for understanding the role of dynastic privilege. However, *Downton Abbey*'s dynasty-making or inheritance practices and their manifold representations have not been analysed, despite their significance for contemporary politics. This research gap is curious given that the genre of so-called heritage film often focuses on 'a crisis of inheritance among the privileged classes, or the threat of disinheritance' (Higson, 2003: 28, cit. in Byrne, 2015: 71).

Downton Abbey's significance as a case study partly stems not only from its popularity but also from its ability to generate lived experiences for its fans. In many ways, *Downton Abbey* is more than a television series consumed in the privacy of homes, as it has fostered an entire industry around it, with theme parties, *Downton Abbey*-inspired merchandise and day trips to the filming locations. Thus, it has had a central role in advancing so-called heritage tourism or the heritage industry in Britain. The fact that the '*Downton* phenomenon' has not been analysed from the perspective of dynasty-making makes it an essential case from which to start the analysis of family succession dramas and of how heritage dramas specifically may contribute to the normalisation of today's privileges and inheritance practices. *Downton Abbey* can be considered a particularly apt object of analysis for such an inquiry, as, unlike many period dramas, it is not an adaptation of an old text, but a made-for-TV drama, written for contemporary audiences. From this perspective, *Downton Abbey* is not primarily a drama about a distant past, but, instead, a narrative that inspires the audiences of the 21st century and may, thus, reorder their ideas about family legacies, kinship bonds and rightfulness in the context of today's inheritance practices.

Assessing in full the role that popular culture plays in constructing and reproducing consent for today's dynastic dynamics necessitates close reading of different series. I begin this work by concentrating in this article on the melodrama of *Downton Abbey*, contrasting and comparing it with other series in order to flesh out both its specificities and similarities with other family succession dramas.

Resilience of the family unit

The role of inherited or family wealth in sustaining and even exacerbating wealth inequalities has been addressed in various studies in recent years (Hansen, 2014; Piketty and Zucman, 2015). Once considered a relic from the aristocratic past superseded by liberal meritocracy and the markets, dynastic wealth is again recognised as a significant source of economic and social inequalities. Showing how inheritances predominate over savings, for example Piketty (2014) has initiated a debate about the cross-generational dynamics of wealth accumulation.

Consequently, interest in the enduring role of dynastic families in social and economic inequalities is growing, and scholars have emphasised the intertwined relationships between kinship and wealth accumulation (see Beckert, 2022). Concepts such as 'inheritance economy' (King's Court Trust, 2019), 'patrimonial capitalism' (Piketty, 2014) and 'succession economics' (Davies, 2020) have been used to describe the current tendencies.

While the economic role of wealthy dynasties has apparently persisted and perhaps even strengthened, the cultural image of family dynasties has been in flux. Despite being resilient, dynastic tendencies are in many ways at odds with the culturally hegemonic principles of Western societies favouring meritocracy and entrepreneurship (Littler, 2017). Normatively, the intergenerational perpetuation of large fortunes seems to violate the principle of merit, which has been a central normative justification for inequalities in liberal societies (Beckert, 2022). Dynastic wealth is hard to legitimate, partly because of the resulting injustices and partly because of anticipated negative consequences for the economy and for democracy (Beckert, 2008). Moor and Friedman (2021) mention an intriguing paradox in contemporary societies: reliance on intergenerational economic support has grown just as norms of meritocracy have become more and more entrenched (p. 621). This tension between the ideals of meritocracy and the re-emergence of dynastic tendencies can also be seen in the public sphere. Discussions on nepotism babies, celebrity families such as the Beckhams and Kardashians, and their political counterparts, the Trump family, all seem to point to the same direction: family dynamics and kinship have not lost their significance under ideals of meritocracy and neoliberalism, but, on the contrary, kinship ties continue to be a central component of today's politics, business and social life (Cooper, 2017; Yanagisako, 2015).

Consequently, recent scholarship has shown particular interest in investigating the *cultural* mechanisms and practices rendering dynastic fortunes durable and legitimised. A central observation is that wealthy families are increasingly preoccupied with the affective dimensions of succession against the pressures of cultural individualisation and meritocracy (Glucksberg and Burrows, 2016; Yanagisako, 2015). This growing awareness has spawned new services tailored to dynastic families, including family consultants, family offices and next-generation programmes geared to keeping families united (Kuusela, 2023). Avoiding real-life succession dramas has, thus, become a key preoccupation – not only for royal and aristocratic families but also more generally – for wealthy business families, to which they respond with detailed succession planning and training of children.

Downton Abbey as a family succession drama

Alongside those socio-economic developments that put emphasis on the role of families in economic and political life, some of the most popular television series of our times address these very same questions: How can or should dynastic transmission of wealth and privilege be organised? What challenges and anxieties do such processes involve? And how should we understand inherited privilege in the first place? There is an abundance of recent fictional narratives – some set in a realist or mythical past, others in the present – that negotiate such concerns and can be called family succession dramas. What

is at stake in such dramas is the return of the family unit to the centre stage of socio-economic and political formations or its resilient role in contemporary power dynamics. As Cooper (2017) argues, unlike what is often thought, neoliberalism does not necessarily privilege atomized individualism and contractual freedom over familial solidarities and inherited status. Instead, the (neo)liberal ethos of personal responsibility has always been undergirded by an imperative of family responsibility, stemming from social conservatism, so that the family has been seen as the primary source of economic security in the neoliberal project (Cooper, 2017).

Recent family succession dramas negotiate exactly such a role for the family, representing it as something that is not only a private or psychological unit but, instead, also an increasingly forceful socio-economic and political force that helps to accumulate wealth and power at the very top of the economic stratum. Family succession dramas can take multiple forms, and the ideological impact that different productions may have on contemporary norms around dynasties varies. Individual shows also take very different types of family dynamics as their objects. For example, *Trust* (2018), which is inspired by true events, and the award-winning fiction *Succession* (2018–2023), both follow business families. The first can be categorised as a thriller that describes the Getty family, whereas the latter is a satire on the fictional owners of a global media conglomerate that generates shifting audience sympathies (Wald, 2020) and affects of schadenfreude in its viewers. Both series are representatives of the family succession drama that offer a critical look at their main characters, but they are ambivalent enough not to be interpreted as straightforward attacks on dynastic dynamics. *Yellowstone* (2018–present), which depicts the Dutton family on their ranch in Montana, is a family succession drama that concentrates on a landowning family, and – like *Succession* – it shows the ugly sides of dynasties. Despite its violent undertone, *Yellowstone's* ideological neo-conservatism has attracted a large number of fans who also seem to subscribe to its conservative message. Starting as a straightforward critique of the Dutton family and its murderous brutality, *Yellowstone* gradually evolves into a celebration of cowboy life and the endangered lifestyle that the family is shown to protect. Both *Succession* and *Yellowstone* are set in contemporary America and dramatise the growing tensions between the meritocratic American dream and patrimonial forms of capitalism that place family dynamics at the heart of public and economic life. Finally, the neo-medieval fantasy saga *Game of Thrones* (2011–2019) follows a number of wars of succession among competing families, describing battles between good and bad dynasties. It follows the lives of different families, most notably the members of the benevolent and righteous house Stark that is in constant conflict with less virtuous families. Similarly to *Game of Thrones*, *The Crown* (2016–present) depicts the life of the British monarchy and is essentially a narrative about how power and charisma can or cannot be inherited.

Although many such dramas show the 'dark sides' of dynasties, what is noteworthy is that the principles of hereditary rights, bloodlines and the primacy of family are seldom questioned or subjected to debate in these series. Instead, the drama focuses primarily on which family member should inherit what and how the fortunes and privileges could be preserved (as in *The Crown* and *Yellowstone*) or – in the worst case – transferred from one privileged family to another, through either wars (as in *Game of Thrones*) or market

transactions (as in *Succession*). In contrast to these violent series, *Downton Abbey* is an example of family succession drama that mostly presents old dynasties as beneficial and benevolent, inviting the audiences – if not to identify – at least to appreciate its main characters. Nevertheless, it shares many characteristics with the bleaker dramas, such as the fascination with birth rights.

Due to their popularity, analysing such cultural representations of family succession is one important way to illustrate how the legitimation of contemporary dynasties is negotiated and reproduced through popular culture in times of meritocratic ideals (Littler, 2017). Feuds concerning inheritances have been a pervasive topic in Western art and popular culture. From Shakespeare's *King Lear* and Balzac's prose to Jane Austen's novels and Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*, fiction has frequently addressed inherited privilege and wealth. Much scholarly work has been accomplished about such art, for example on historically strong literary tropes, like the prodigal son (Ladegaard, 2021). Despite this long artistic tradition and the ensuing research, we nevertheless seem to lack any cogent analysis of the *contemporary* cultural dynamics in which hereditary privileges are *in principle* outmoded, but *in practice* very much alive, and – apparently – recurrently affirmed in popular culture by family succession dramas.

Following the constructionist tradition of cultural studies, the analysis of family succession dramas and *Downton Abbey* in this article is therefore based on a basic understanding of representations as constitutive of social reality. Representation is a 'signifying practice' 'that *makes things mean*' (Hall, 2003: 24, italics in original) and popular culture is an essential arena in which meaning is produced, disseminated and exchanged (Hall, 2003). Consequently, family succession dramas not only reflect but also construct attitudes and norms concerning the importance of family legacies and inheritances. This is particularly the case with historical dramas that construct meanings about old traditions that help to explain the practices of the present. As Byrne (2015: 2) notes, series like *Downton Abbey* raise questions about how we choose to remember and what those cultural memories tell us about society today (for a similar discussion on *The Crown*, see Rampazzo Gambarato and Heuman, 2022). As *Downton Abbey* is not an adaptation but a drama written for contemporary audiences, it not only constructs and negotiates meanings concerning the past but also, most clearly, those concerning the present.

Such questions familiar to representation studies have also interested – from a slightly different angle – scholars developing culturally-oriented approaches to economic phenomena and the so-called moral economy. A number of scholars have explored how culture and moral norms are central to the making of economic spaces and objects (du Gay and Pryke, 2002). Economic practices, such as those concerning inheritances, are thus perceived as culturally embedded so that cultural representations of what is appropriate and desirable organise economic behaviour into predictable patterns.

The concept of 'moral economy' in particular has been used to draw attention to the shared understandings underlying economic actions. Arguing that views of socio-economic disparities are embedded in a wider moral economy or a common understanding of what constitutes a desirable distribution of societal benefits and burdens (Sayer, 2007; Svallfors, 2006), such scholars have investigated the moral orientations behind inequalities. From such a perspective, inheritances, too, are a cultural practice with a specific 'ethics of inheritance' (Lafaye, 2008), or 'moral economies of inheritance' (Ladegaard,

2021). As noted, the moral norms concerning inheritance may, however, be fragile in contemporary times, as they are often at odds with the ideals of liberal, meritocratic societies. This makes the cultural representations of inheritance practices a possibly contested terrain. Analysing the moral economy of *Downton Abbey* in relation to questions of inheritance and wealth perpetuation, the remainder of the article demonstrates how televisual narrative, character development and world building located in the past may shape moral economies of today, contributing to broader processes of inequalities between those who inherit and those who do not.

Unlike most critics who have analysed the series in the context of the United Kingdom, in the following I analyse *Downton Abbey* as a globally circulating text. I detach it from its British particularities, approaching it as a popular text with the potential to constitute moral economies transnationally. As Littler and Williamson (2018) note, together with *The Crown* and *Victoria, Downton Abbey* packages British upper-class life for a global market, being part of a new wave of extravagantly favourable representations of the super wealthy (p. 147). I will deepen this global approach to the analysis by comparing and contrasting *Downton Abbey* with other globally successful family succession dramas produced in different countries.

Downton Abbey and dynasty-making

One of the greatest British television success stories of the 2010s, *Downton Abbey* combines period drama with elements of soap opera (Byrne, 2015: 66). Six seasons were broadcast in the United Kingdom from 2010 to 2015, followed by global success and something of a Downton industry as well as two films in 2019 and 2022. The series is set in Yorkshire, England, from 1912 to 1925 and tells the stories of the aristocratic, landowning Crawley family and their servants. The main characters are Lord and Lady Grantham – Robert and Cora Crawley – the three daughters, Mary, Edith and Sybil, their extended family and a large number of domestic servants, who all live in a splendid mansion called Downton Abbey.

The 'winning formula' that blends class privilege with liberal tolerance (Byrne, 2015: 9) navigates skilfully between contemporary and historical norms. In so doing, I argue that the series not only describes the social forces of the era it is set in but also reworks our contemporary moral economies around inheritances and dynasties. In many ways, *Downton Abbey* represents 'an important attempt to write the working classes back into history', as Byrne (2015) notes, and this constitutes part of its charm (p. 9). But as I will demonstrate, in its relation to inheritance, the series (together with many other family succession dramas) promotes an almost one-sidedly conservative view, supporting a moral economy that enables the legitimation not only of past but also of contemporary dynasty-making.

It does this primarily through three different means: (1) by constructing images of rightful heirs fully compatible with contemporary norms concerning inheritances, (2) by drawing attention to the general goods that dynastic wealth may offer for local communities at large, and (3) by representing dynastic and accumulated ownership as custodianship or stewardship tied to family loyalty, instead of actual capital ownership.

In short, in the fictional world of the series, storylines concerning inheritance are never used to challenge the existing (fictional) hierarchies nor the contemporary (real)

norms concerning cross-generational wealth accumulation. This way, the series affirms, rather than contests, contemporary norms around dynastic wealth. In the following, I analyse these three means of legitimisation in greater detail and compare, or contrast, them with the representation strategies found in other family succession dramas, in order to highlight both the specificities of *Downton Abbey* and its similarities with other examples of the genre. Understanding how different family succession dramas participate in the making of contemporary norms around family succession and inheritances requires an in-depth analysis of each show and their ideological specificities. This article offers such an analysis of *Downton Abbey*, but in order to locate it inside the thematic genre of family succession drama, the analysis also identifies common characteristics between the shows, as well as some of their main differences.

Constructing rightful heirs

Throughout the series, several *Downton Abbey* characters are engaged in constructing images of rightful heirs by identifying some people as entitled to inherit and others less so. In doing so, it resembles the setting of many other family succession dramas, like *Game of Thrones* which concentrates on the question of who is, or should be, considered the rightful heir to the throne. Similarly, *The Crown*, which follows the story of the 'real life' British monarchy, constantly raises the question of deservingness: Why is Elisabeth the queen instead of her sister Margaret? Why is the Duke of Windsor exiled after his abdication? In other words, even in the context of most formalised dynasties, the drama is often built around questions of entitlement and rightfulness.

The very first episode of *Downton Abbey* opens with great consternation about who should be seen as the rightful heir to the estate. The legal heir to Downton Abbey is found to have perished on the *Titanic*, leaving the dynasty in confusion. *Downton Abbey's* first seasons depict the three Crawley daughters – and indeed the dynasty and the estate – as victims of an entail that will see the estate (including Lady Grantham's fortune and the earl's title) pass on the death of the present Lord Grantham to an unknown third cousin, Matthew Crawley.

Entail, or entailment, refers to a restriction limiting the inheritance of property to a specified succession of heirs. Entails were legal devices still used in the *Downton Abbey* era to prevent the disintegration of large estates. Entailed property was inherited by the nearest descendant in the male line, who in the case of *Downton Abbey* is the cousin Matthew, instead of Mary, the eldest daughter of the aristocratic family.

The moral and practical question of who will and should inherit the estate constitutes the main dilemma of the first seasons. What is contested is less the sisters' livelihoods – all the daughters are entitled to annual allowances – but the preservation of the estate in the hands of the dynastic family. Here *Downton Abbey* resembles the setting of *Yellowstone* which follows the Duttons and their attempts to preserve its ranch in the hands of the family.

In the first two episodes of *Downton Abbey*, different characters discuss the unexpected situation, which is almost unanimously seen as unjust. The family's lawyer Murray and Lord Grantham discuss the entail:

MURRAY: As you know, on your death the heir to the title inherits everything, except for the sums set aside for your daughters and your widow.
ROBERT: Yes.
MURRAY: Owing to the terms of her settlement, this will include the bulk of your wife's fortune.
ROBERT: It has been our sole topic of conversation since the day the ship went down.
MURRAY: Of course it must seem horribly unjust to Lady Grantham, but that is how the law stands.
ROBERT: Is there really no way to detach her money from the estate? Even to me, it seems absurd.
(Season 1: Episode 1, from here on S1:E1)

The fictional characters invite the contemporary audience to judge the past practice of entail as 'horribly unjust' and 'absurd'. Entail was a contested, but common, practice among the landed aristocracy in Robert's and his father's times. England abolished entail in 1925, but even today, it stipulates male-only primogeniture for aristocratic titles, and testamentary freedom can still be used to favour specified heirs.

Despite being legally valid and relatively common in the fictional world of *Downton Abbey*, the characters unanimously condemn the practice. Even Robert's mother, Violet, one of the most conservative characters in the series, describes the new situation as one that she 'refuses' to believe, stating with aristocratic arrogance that she 'didn't run Downton for thirty years to see it go, lock, stock and barrel, to a stranger from God knows where' (S1:E1). Similarly, the butler, Carson, the 'guardian of the old order' (Byrne, 2015, 84), calls the law 'wicked' (S1:E2). In these dialogues, Mary is univocally constructed as the *morally rightful* heir, not Matthew who has not lived an aristocratic life, but identifies himself as 'a middle class lawyer and the son of a middle class doctor', to which his mother Isobel, however, adds that he is 'upper middle class' (S1:E2).

For most of Season 1, the gendered nature of inheritance is debated by several characters, and – as Byrne (2015) notes – these practices always seem on the point of being challenged, but they never are (p. 72). Instead, Mary's alleged moral rights are settled with the help of melodramatic love. The dynastic logic is secured when Matthew and Mary fall in love, marry and produce a male heir. As Byrne (2015) notes, Matthew's lovable character 'allows the series to ultimately shy away from tackling the gender issues which surround primogeniture' (p. 72) as the problem is solved through love. Equally, it can be argued that the adaptability of Matthew's character saves the dynasty, allowing it to prosper in the hands of an aristocratic descendant, instead of a character with an upper-middle-class background.

This is the first important moment in the narrative from the perspective of inheritances and modern dynasty-making: the interests of the family dynasty are secured with the help of a plot, in which love not only comes to the rescue of a female character but also, even more importantly, to the preservation of dynastic wealth within the aristocratic family. By constructing Mary as the rightful heir, the series may criticise the gender norms of the time it depicts, but it simultaneously subscribes to contemporary norms that prioritise biological offspring. The dialogues between the characters are consonant with

the contemporary outlook in Western societies, in which (regardless of gender) the members of *the nuclear family* are seen as the rightful inheritors. In the fictional world of the series, the moral rights of the aristocratic daughter are presented as her birth right – a formula that corresponds with the contemporary moral economy regarding inheritances, both in its gender neutrality and in its preservation of hereditary privilege.

The contemporary norm that stresses hereditary rights is first and foremost reflected in the legislation of those countries, such as France, Germany and the Scandinavian countries, that have included in their legislations a so-called compulsory portion, according to which a certain portion of an inheritance is reserved for the closest relatives. However, according to research, even in countries that have full testamentary freedom, such as England and Wales, there exists a clear 'ethics of inheritance' (Lafaye, 2008), a social norm to leave bequests to family members even when this perpetuates inequalities across generations (Finch and Mason, 2000).

Downton Abbey affirms this contemporary principle through several plotlines, not only in its depiction of Mary's moral right over Matthew. It depicts processes in which testamentary freedom is exercised, but this freedom is used to the advantage of others than the nuclear family only when the testator has no issue: Edith inherits the media business of her lover, Michael, who had no children; Bertie, Edith's intended spouse, inherits from his cousin who was childless and Matthew inherits from the father of his fiancé Lavinia, but *only* after Lavinia has died. Finally, the cook, Mrs. Patmore, inherits from her childless aunt. With the exception of Mrs. Patmore, all these indirect inheritors are also aristocrats. Even when inheritances pass to others than the next of kin, cross-class inheritances are not portrayed.

Finally, even Matthew, initially the embodiment of upwards mobility through the prospect of a significant cross-class inheritance, dies in a car crash at the end of Season 3, *before* inheriting the estate. It is this tragic death of Matthew that fully secures the privileges of the Crawley dynasty, as after his death his fortune passes to Mary. A character from the upper middle class is, thus, sacrificed for the sake of the dynasty, and this happens first – or, in fact, immediately – on the birth of the next aristocratic heir, his and Mary's son George. Matthew conceives the heir and dies before inheriting the estate.

The centrality of the bloodline is also present in many other family succession dramas, as in *Game of Thrones* and *Yellowstone*, in which differences between biological children and foster children are preserved, so that the ranch and the kingdom are perceived as 'properties' to which only biological children have full right. Like in *Downton Abbey*, also in *Yellowstone* obstacles related to the future ownership of the ranch are overcome when the biological daughter of the dynasty falls in love and marries the foster son. However, unlike *Downton Abbey*, in *Yellowstone* the foster son is in many ways presented as more deserving (of the ranch) than the biological children, but as in *Downton Abbey*, the solution to the dilemma is found through romantic love, whereas the primacy of the biological children is not challenged.

The question in the fictional world of *Downton Abbey* – as in many other family succession dramas – is, thus, never whether the right to bequests is just, but who should be considered the rightful heir/ess, and the answer is irrefutable: the members of the nuclear family. Similarly, in *Game of Thrones*, the bloodline is not questioned as such as the story revolves around the question of who are the virtuous and rightful heirs in contrast to the non-virtuous.

By almost fanatically emphasising the importance of bloodline in the context of inheritances, land ownership and other privileges, these family succession dramas help to naturalise these dynamics in today's context. Even though series such as *Downton Abbey, The Crown, Game of Thrones* and *Yellowstone* are ambiguous enough to allow resistant readings, it is nevertheless noteworthy that what the audiences are offered are numerous seasons of stories about people who are interesting – and worth of being portrayed – because of their birth rights. The audiences get immersed in the sorrows, joys and pains of heirs, while non-heirs are given the role of supporting characters.

The benevolent dynasty for the common good

In addition to constructing images of morally rightful, aristocratic, heirs, *Downton Abbey* affirms the rights of – and the need for – wealthy dynasties by describing their contributions to the common good. Preservation of dynastic wealth – often disguised as preservation of cultural heritage – is a pervasive theme in Seasons 4–6. These latter seasons represent the economic challenges of landed estates and the younger generation's attempts to modernise Downton Abbey.

As a historical melodrama, *Downton Abbey* depicts the 'difficult adjustment process' of wealthy Britons at the beginning of the 20th century, as the landed estates faced unprecedented changes (Piketty, 2020: 451). The series depicts these changes by describing, for example the selling of estates, the rise of real estate developers and the difficulties of the under-butler Thomas in finding a new position when the aristocrats start cutting costs. However, what is important from the perspective of the sympathies the series creates is that the Grantham dynasty *does* survive. The melodrama invites the audience to walk alongside the family and hope for its survival, which ultimately comes to pass.

In several instances, the series invites the audience to mourn the (potential) loss of aesthetically valuable environments and the cultural heritage that the old estates embody and conserve. This sense of loss is depicted vividly in scenes in which one family is forced to sell its estate and auction the contents of the house. The scenes open with the camera moving from crystal chandeliers to fine porcelain, all of which are for sale. Then follows an exchange between characters, all of whom deplore the losses of the former owner, Sir John:

MARY:	Crikey. They're selling everything.
ROBERT [looking at a painting of a woman in Regency clothing]:	This is John's grandmother, for God's sake.
CORA:	They must think it's too large.
SIR JOHN:	Too large for London.
CORA:	Dear John. We're so sorry. At least I hope it's what you want.
SIR JOHN:	But it isn't. Not at all.
ROBERT:	You're having quite a clean sweep.

SIR JOHN: We've kept a few portraits to make a decent show in the London house, but what's the point of storing the rest? This life is over for us. It won't come back.
(S6:E1)

Here the survival of dynasties is depicted as a fragile process that can lead to the loss of cultural heritage, or its dispersion into disrespectful hands – as in the auction scene, the new owner is portrayed as rude and hot-tempered. Even Sir John's wedding present from his tenants is up for sale, something which the kitchen maid Daisy does not 'think is right'. Daisy concludes by saying to her father-in-law, a tenant of Sir John: 'It's as if they were selling your past along with their own' (S6:E1).

Here aristocratic families are presented as guardians of a common past. Of those family succession dramas that are located in the 21st century, it is perhaps *Yellowstone* that comes closest to such conservativeness. In *Downton Abbey*, it is the Edwardian era with its elegant beauty that is on the verge of disappearing if the aristocratic dynasties like that of Crawleys are allowed to disappear, whereas, in *Yellowstone*, it is the cowboy culture that the dynastic Dutton family is supposed to protect. When running for governorship, John Dutton gives a speech in which he states that

> 'there is a war being waged against our way of life – So if it's progress you seek, do not vote for me. I am the opposite of progress. I'm the wall that it bashes against and I will not be the one who breaks' (SE4:E7).

In this way, both *Downton Abbey* and *Yellowstone* seem to suggest that the dynasties are not only protecting themselves but are in fact the true essence of the nation, the Englishness of the Edwardian era and the Americanness of the settlers.

The different scenes depicting the loss of wealthy families in *Downton Abbey*, or the myriad visual representations of cowboy culture in *Yellowstone*, can be further elaborated through the criticism against the so-called heritage film, referring to productions that, according to its critics, 'transform the past into a series of commodities' for the entertainment market (Higson, 2012: 606). As in heritage films and *Downton Abbey*, also in many other family succession dramas, one notices a tension between visual splendour and the storyline. According to Higson (2012), heritage films carry a contradiction between form and narrative: 'the past is displayed as visually spectacular pastiche, inviting a nostalgic gaze that resists the ironies and social critiques so often suggested narratively by these films' (p. 602). As in other productions of the genre, so also in *Downton Abbey*, the aesthetics of the series offer a counter-narrative to the spoken discourse. It is this contradiction between narratives aspiring to social progress and an indulgence in the spectacle of an aristocratic Englishness that makes heritage films ideologically ambivalent, and *Downton Abbey* follows this tradition wholeheartedly. Even though the series sympathises with the servant class, on another level, the audience is called upon to identify with the dilemmas of the landed aristocracy while marvelling at the beauty of their lifestyles.

The same argument holds for many family succession dramas. For example, *Yellowstone* is full of spectacular sceneries of Montana in which the cowboys show

their skills, with country music playing in the background. Such aesthetics is in striking contradiction with the brutal behaviour of the Dutton family at the level of the plot. Similarly, also *Succession* offers plenty of compelling representations of luxurious lifestyles, while the script portrays the rich as disgusting in several ways. All these series are ambiguous in this sense: the audio-visual aesthetics and the storyline often contradict each other, creating aesthetic pleasure in the form of 'nostalgia for the present'.

In *Downton Abbey*, the first seasons build on splendid images, common to the heritage film genre, whereas the later seasons can be interpreted as mourning the *possible* loss of the Downton Abbey estate and the *actual* loss of other similar estates. In the series, dynastic ownership is repeatedly transformed into common good that benefits the entire community, for example in the form of cultural heritage or beautiful landscapes. Particularly, the Crawley family is represented as the (last) guarantor of the common good, as in scenes in which members of the family discuss the possibility of selling part of their lands to Mr. Wavell, a property developer. Before even meeting the developer, Robert shares his hesitations, identifying the landowners as victims: 'So, we're paid once, and in return the field is lost, the village is spoiled and Mr. Wavell moves on in search of his next victim' (S5:E4).

Later, Mary, Robert and (late Sybil's husband) Tom discuss the plan, and Robert decides not to sell:

ROBERT: I want to explain why I think we should turn down Wavell's offer.
MARY: I know. We are only the caretakers of Downton. But Papa, some things have to change.
ROBERT: True. But we mustn't destroy what we're trying to protect. Wavell would wreck this lovely place for ever, with his ugly cheap houses.
MARY: But you can't block all development.
ROBERT: I won't. I intend to expand, but without spoiling. I'm going to make a plan and find a solid builder who can fit into the village and not ruin it.
TOM: That may be hard to achieve.
ROBERT: It may be harder than cashing Wavell's cheque, but does that mean we shouldn't try?
TOM: No.
ROBERT: We will build. We'll even make money for the estate. But we won't destroy what people love about this place. Do you think that's wrong?
MARY: No. It's not wrong.
ROBERT: That's all I'm asking.
(S5:E4)

Tom nods and they all look out across the beautiful green meadow. The theme music fades in and the episode ends. The music invites the viewer to interpret Robert's last words as the essence of the series: here is a balanced aristocrat who takes care of people's needs and wishes. The old lord is represented as someone who is ready to lower his own profits and make an effort to preserve what 'people love'. Unlike new money, dynastic

wealth is represented as neither profit-seeking nor destructive, but, instead, as money that can balance between 'development' and people's love of beauty and protection. The historical past is used to teach contemporary audiences of the benevolent dimensions of dynasties.

Here *Downton Abbey* differs – at least on the surface – from some family succession dramas that are located in the contemporary milieu or more recent past, such as *Succession* or *Trust*. The modern dynasties are often represented as greedy and in constant conflict with the communities around them. However, the ideological dimensions of such shows are seldom straightforward. For example, *Yellowstone* begins as a violent story describing the conflicts between the Duttons and the local community, but its setting gradually changes so that, by Season 5, the patriarch of the family has become the elected governor of Montana, representing the will of the community, in addition to that of his family. Thus, ideals of common good are present not only in depictions of the aristocratic past but also in many contemporary fictional stories of family dynasties.

Stewardship not ownership

A common criticism levelled at the heritage film genre includes its fascination 'with the private property, the culture, and the values of a particular class' (Higson, 2012: 608). From its first episode onwards, *Downton Abbey* also focuses on questions of private property and its fate at the moment of inheritance and in the turbulence of modernity. However, despite this fascination with the question of who may own and inherit, the moral economy of the series follows a pattern often found in contemporary real-life narratives about dynastic fortunes: namely that the owners of such fortunes are not really owners (in the common sense of the word), but rather custodians or stewards of legacies that go beyond the banalities of who is rich and who is not (Kuusela, 2018).

In *Downton Abbey*, already in Season 1, Robert distances himself from regular ownership, calling himself, instead, a custodian of the dynasty:

ROBERT: My fortune is the work of others, who laboured to build a great dynasty. Do I have the right to destroy their work? Or impoverish that dynasty? I am a custodian, my dear, not an owner. I must strive to be worthy of the task I have been set (S1:E4).

As in the scene in which Robert refuses to sell his land to the constructor of 'ugly cheap houses', here, too, destruction is represented as the alternative to the existing order, in which it is the dynasty that needs to own – or take care of – the estate. Later in the series, Mary repeats this idea, referring to the figure of the caretaker, as opposed to that of the owner: 'Papa, you always say we're not the owners of Downton, but the caretakers. Very well. Let's take care of it' (S4:E4).

Such expressions of an 'intergenerational self' (Fivush et al., 2008) can be interpreted as an attempt to reconcile the tension between contemporary meritocratic ideals and the receipt of 'unearned' privileges (Moor and Friedman, 2021). With the help of a multigenerational conception of subjectivity, such expressions position one's dynastic fortunes not really as one's own, but instead as something to be cared for as a courtesy to previous and next generations. Keeping a dynasty running is presented as having little to do with private wealth and privilege, but more with caretaking and a multigenerational understanding of one's role in society. A similar moral approach to the wealthy can also be

seen in many popular culture representations of the rich. As Littler and Williamson (2017) argue, many recent television programmes depicting British aristocracy are 'keen to emphasise the story that they work very hard: that they are tireless 'grafters' in the service of the common good' (p. 154). The audiences are encouraged to admire the extent of the emotional labour that different members of the elites do in favour of the community, whether it is the nation, as in *The Crown*, or an endangered lifestyle as in *Downton Abbey* and *Yellowstone.* Such narratives that communicate an almost altruistic ethos often draw on old imaginaries of benevolent patriarchy and unity, familiar, for example from the context of monarchies (Clancy, 2020, 2021) – an important reason to analyse historical family succession dramas such as *Downton Abbey* and *The Crown* in the context of contemporary moral economies. With the help of such old narratives that describe different forms of stewardship, dynastic ownership is elevated into something less mundane than money.

Although at first glance such conceptions of ownership may appear obsolete – belonging to the (fictional) post-Edwardian era – on closer scrutiny, such sentiments are compatible with the narratives surrounding dynasty-making today. Contemporary members of wealthy dynasties likewise often describe their ownership as a form of stewardship or custodianship (Kuusela, 2018). Writing on contemporary trust laws in the United States, Alison Tait (2022) has curiously used Robert's words cited above as an example of how contemporary 'beneficiaries [also] learn to place themselves in a certain position of entitlement toward the assets, knowing they are a core part of the family' (p. 1973). She continues by noting that 'trust beneficiaries can take the presence of heirloom assets for granted and, over time, learn how precisely to understand and narrate the family wealth without any fear of its loss'.

Inside the genre of family succession drama, *Yellowstone* is a good example of such an outlook that presents ownership as stewardship of the land. Equally, *The Crown* and *Game of Thrones* can be perceived as series that foreground the sacrifices of the family members in the name of stewardship. In *The Crown*, the members of the monarchy are represented as miserable in their private lives because of their public duties. In *Game of Thrones*, Jon Snow gives up his life to join the Night's Watch, a military order defending the realm. Being a member of an important family is, thus, often represented in family succession dramas as a burden that brings duties, rather than opportunities for lavish consumption and enjoyment. This is the case in *Downton Abbey*, too.

Such understanding and representation of dynastic wealth obscure the fact that the caretaking families are not only stewards but also immensely wealthy owners, and that even today a cross-generational outlook is a key element in the accumulation of dynastic wealth (Kuusela, 2018; Glucksberg and Burrows, 2016; Higgins, 2022).

The moral economies of dynasties both past and present thus tend to legitimise current wealth and privileges through the work of the previous and the rights of the future generations. This way, the survival of the dynasty is presented as an anti-individualistic duty.

Finally, the primacy of the dynasty and its survival in the world of *Downton Abbey* is affirmed in a series of negotiations between Matthew and Mary in Season 3, when Matthew finds out that he is to inherit from the father of his (late) fiancée, Lavinia. For a while, he struggles with the thought, feeling he does not deserve the bequest but eventually accepts it in order to 'save' the Abbey. Lord Grantham has made catastrophic

investments in rail shares, which threaten the estate, and Mary and Matthew are on the verge of serious conflict, as Matthew questions his own right to the bequest (something that the aristocratic characters never do): 'Darling! What right have I [to the money]? And, frankly, what difference does it make? I shan't keep it if I get it' (S3:E1).

In her response, Mary sets the interests of the dynasty, of 'us', against Matthew's personal ethics of inheritance, according to which he should not profit from Lavinia's death. Finally, Matthew's dilemma is resolved when he receives a posthumous letter from the testator stating that the bequest truly was meant for him. The letter persuades Matthew to accept the inheritance. Once again, the narrative reconciles possible conflicts over inheritance in favour of the dynasty and the principal members of the Crawley family. Whoever can save the dynasty has the moral right to inherit. Thus, even though modern capital markets may constitute risks on which the audience is invited to ponder, ultimately the dynasty survives.

The role of family ties is essential here. In analysing the justifications contemporary Londoners attach to large intergenerational gifts, Moor and Friedman (2021) suggest that there is a conflict in these debates between the value of family ties and those of meritocracy. In the world of *Downton Abbey*, the decision between these 'different orders of worth' is always the same: after some hesitation, family ties and the dynasty take precedence. The same is repeatedly proposed in *Succession*, in which the children of the dynasty keep on returning to their appalling father, unable to resist the call of the family business. Even though *Succession* tells a much more violent story on the primacy of family ties than *Downton Abbey*, the two series also have much in common. In many family succession dramas, the needs of the dynasty repeatedly triumph over other values or systems of norms, and the domestic principle is preferred over more equal forms of wealth distribution. This way, family succession dramas are often compatible not only with contemporary inheritance practices but also with neoliberal politics that wish 'to reestablish the private family as the primary source of economic security and a comprehensive alternative to the welfare state', as described by Cooper (2017: 9).

Conclusions

From the practices that prioritise the nuclear family to the foregrounding of altruistic activities, the moral economy of *Downton Abbey* affirms in several ways the contemporary norms regarding inheritances, family values and wealthy dynasties. It invites its viewers to acknowledge the needs and moral rights to hereditary privilege and fortunes and the importance of the family, thus ruling out any radical alternatives to contemporary dynastic dynamics. It does this inside the stylistic genre of melodrama, thus presenting a feel-good variant of the thematic genre of family succession drama.

In general, family succession dramas often describe the laborious sides of inheriting. It is presented as a heavy burden and precarious process entailing a lot of work. From Jon Snow in *Game of Thrones* and Kayce and Jamie Dutton in *Yellowstone* to Sybil in *Downton Abbey*, being a heir is hardly ever presented as an easy job in family succession dramas. In *Succession*, it is accompanied by psychological violence, drug addiction and suicidal tendencies. In *Yellowstone*, it is tied with bonds of loyalties so tight that they necessitate murders of non-family members.

In the world of *Downton Abbey*, too, the survival of dynasties is described in many ways as precarious. From Matthew's initial appearance as the legal heir to the economic difficulties caused by Robert's bad investments, the series suggests that the durability of great dynasties should not be taken for granted as wealth may also evaporate. This is also the central message of *Yellowstone* in which the Dutton family struggles to keep itself united and financially healthy. Also in *Succession*, the story stresses the vulnerabilities of the dynasty. The plot constantly plays with the possibility of the internal collapse of the family and its business. In today's reality, however, such vulnerabilities are rarely realised: wealth perpetuation across generations, for the benefit of the few at the expense of the many, is a contemporary problem as much as it was a historical phenomenon. Family succession dramas focusing on the difficulties of dynasty-making appear ideological in this tendency to underestimate the enduring ability of rich families to preserve their positions. Meaningful political debates on hereditary rights and the moral rights around inheritance are yet to arise.

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