

Genes fit for a queen

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Ah, the eugenic thrill of a good wedding! Status weds beauty: a promising start. Royalty weds a good-genes commoner: excellent progress. A 6'3" prince who flies rescue helicopters and shows self-deprecating humor, weds a 5'10" amazon with a good eye for fashion: truly, this is the romance at the end of the rainbow.

On April 29, these two fit young humans, Prince William and Kate Middleton, will be wed, and two billion people will watch. What will we see? Honestly, it depends on your sex. A confusing thing about living in a two-sexed species is that certain social rituals have quite different meanings depending on whether you watch them with a male or a female brain. Nowhere is this divide greater than in the realms of courtship and reproduction, where eons of sexual choice have shaped the evolution of human nature.

A wedding may be played against a backdrop of gauzy sentimentalism, but beneath all the trimmings – the dress, the flowers, and the finger-buffet – lie the iron imperatives of sexual conflict. The mating minds of men and women have evolved to achieve different ends so it is hardly surprising that we interpret any wedding, let alone this one, in entirely different ways.

Male brains will be sparked by Will's military titles (Flight Lieutenant, Captain in the Blues and Royals, Commodore-in-Chief of Scotland) and Kate's signals of fertility and fitness (cheekbones, legs, style, humor) to conjure a primal mating scenario – King Kong and Ann Darrow, Genghis Khan lying on the white-bellied daughters of those he has vanquished, that sort of thing. After the fourth pint or second spliff, our imaginings may become more fanciful. Will is recast as the warrior-prince, riding his awesome mounts – the charger called Ducati 1198S with the power of 160 horses, and the whirling-winged dragon called Sky King that he flies over the icy-dark Irish Sea to rescue drowning sailors. To secure his future queen, this brave knight Will, or Wombat, as his royal parents called him in youth, launched a daring bride-raid from Windsor, winding far to the west – nigh on 30 miles up the great Thames River – to the very wilds of Bucklebury. Before reinforcements from Thatcham or Reading could intervene, the prince and his retinue had snatched away the fair and highly symmetrical maiden. Her kinfolk gave chase, of course, but the prince's gentle demeanor and land-holdings reassured them that he might, if appeased, treat their daughter well. Her parents had the wit to understand that he would make a good sire to their grand-whelps – at least better than any man from Bucklebury's nearby loser-camps: Tufts Clump, Burnt Hill, Cold Ash. So, the prince is ready to celebrate, the wine to flow, and the bride to be bedded. And tomorrow – as befits any high-status polygynist – he can plan yet more bride-raids.

Female observers are likely to find their erotic imaginations taking a different path. Whether inclined to coo over the gown and swoon as the fairytale glass carriage processes up the Mall, or to a more critical appraisal of the ceremony's extravagance, the feminine gaze understands that this wedding is really Kate's triumph, not William's. Kate holds out the hope to ambitious women everywhere that if your man-claim is early-staked, and your mineshafts are sunk deep and well worked, you may strike gold.

Consider. When Kate was aged 5, her mother launched a business to deliver “Fairyland Princess”, “Valiant Knight”, and other royal-romance-themed party goods to children. A teenage Kate saw her friends at Marlborough College put posters of dreamy Prince William on their walls. At the University of St Andrews, Kate caught Will’s eye early in an art history class and in a translucent dress on a fundraiser’s fashion runway. Aware that there are many women at St Andrews, some brighter, some more beautiful, Kate perseveres with the standard female primate tend-and-befriend treatment of skittish males: spend time together, create comfort, share humor, elicit oxytocin. They become flat-mates, then lovers, then make public appearances together. Small triumphs.

Yet time passes. Complacency sets in. Kate’s prince may still fancy himself a potential polygynist or roving Genghis Khan, and his novelty-seeking may yet prove stronger than her duration-seeking. Even after years of living together, she still has no real commitment from Will. The women of Britain, tabloid-keen, share her frustration. Following Saint-Exupery, her Little Prince needs his taming.

At some point, Kate must have looked at herself in the mirror and thought, “I can either be known to history as ‘That girl King William lived with before he met Queen Gaga’, or else I can harness my Will-to-Power to fulfill my queenly ambitions”. She apparently chose the latter, imposed a temporary separation, provoked his sexual jealousy by going out clubbing in that black sequined mini-dress (the 27 July 2007 one), and found same-sex support from her rowing team, aptly called Sisterhood. It worked! Using her formidable mating intelligence Kate somehow managed to coax a proposal from the previously reluctant William.

So finally the payoff comes: the 18-carat sapphire engagement ring, previously worn by Princess Diana, and the photo-call announcement at Clarence House. A date is set and 1,900 guests invited for a ritual that will cost an estimated £20 million – despite Kate’s nod to straitened times, forfeiting the traditional carriage in favor of a modest limousine to take her to the church. The wedding at Westminster Abbey, the grand procession, and the appearance on the Buckingham Palace balcony, fulfill the key game-theory requirements for a ceremony to work as a reliable signal of romantic commitment: high cost and a big audience. And when the pomp and pageantry is over, Kate wins the ultimate biological prize – the opportunity to pass on her genes to a future king or queen.

Kate’s joy at these prospects appears intense and genuine, and is worthy of celebration. To me as an evolutionary psychologist, she exemplifies the triumph of female mating intelligence over the male mammalian brain’s default modes: complacency, indecisiveness and sloth. More generally, she epitomizes the active role that women have played throughout human evolution, not just through their powers of mate choice, but through coaxing from their men increased commitments of time, energy, protection, parenting, meat and, eventually, money.

Kate’s accomplishment deserves recognition. Politically correct media praise female role models for any other form of savvy – emotional intelligence (Oprah Winfrey), political intelligence (Hilary Clinton), acting intelligence (Meryl Streep), even culinary intelligence (Nigella Lawson). But achievements such as Kate’s have been sidelined since the 1970s, when gender feminism questioned the legitimacy of women directing any of their wit or imagination to solving the problem of securing a long-term partner.

These days any celebration of mating intelligence is a guilty pleasure, consigned to costume dramas, romantic comedies and women’s tabloid journalism. What has been a central

application of female intelligence throughout history, across cultures, even across species – getting a high-mate-value male to commit – has been devalued. Perhaps with this royal wedding, we can rehabilitate mating intelligence as a fascinating and laudable form of human cognition.

Don't forget, Kate will be Britain's first merit-based princess – a commoner selected by William for her own natural fitness indicators rather than her family's ancestry. Good genes, not blue blood, have helped her win her man. She is the most athletically gifted woman to marry into the Windsor family business for quite some time, talented in netball, rounders, hockey, swimming and rowing. With due respect to Diana, Kate is more beautiful. Kate is not apparently an intellectual, but she is very intelligent by any normal standard, with a 2:1 degree (like an American A- average) from an internationally renowned university.

Besides, she has flair. And if we intellectuals can only set aside our assumption that merit equals general intelligence expressed academically, we can appreciate how important this quality is. Kate's major in Art History, a form of applied perceptual psychology, taught her to question what the eye is telling the brain, and to critically appraise every masterpiece – whether a medieval manuscript or a Daniella Issa Helayel dress. That Kate has a talent for this is clear in her sense of style – the most ancient, universal, personal and yet underrated form of art in our species. I have argued that artistry is a key attribute of the human mating mind, honed through sexual selection by generations of humans being attracted to creative mates. Kate clearly has it.

Having said all that, what many know and few admit is that Kate's triumph would not be so great if she was more overwhelmingly beautiful or accomplished. If Anne Hathaway, the same age as Kate, had somehow taken an interest in Prince William, rather than in her Italian fraudster boyfriend, Will may have fallen all too easily for her. The face, the body and the major acting talent give a potent Hathaway-buzz to the male observer's brain. A Windsor/Hathaway wedding would have been more glamorous, on the principal that two fames conjoined are more compelling than one.

Yet such a match between an ultra-high-mate-value woman and a future king would not have been as outstanding an example of female mating intelligence. Nor would it have been as "romantically inspiring". Insofar as Kate has any mediocre qualities, the Windsor/Middleton merger holds out the hope that ordinary women everywhere might aspire, despite their own imperfections, to extract similar commitment signals from their boyfriends. For the lonely female grad student, a Hathaway romance would have been depressing, whereas the Middleton romance is uplifting: put too crudely, Kate conquered the world's tallest status-mountain with little more than cheekbones, legs, smart thinking and moxie.

More impressive yet, her prince is a bone fide good catch. He doesn't just bring status and wealth to the marriage; he too possesses the good genes destined to make this a biologically beneficent union. Not for Will the Hapsburg jaw or another manifestation of royal inbreeding. He is tall, well-built and pinup handsome. And he possesses many of the qualities women most value in a mate. He is empathic – he once spent a night sleeping rough on the streets of London in sub-zero temperatures to experience the pain of homeless people. He is generous – he supports a list of charities and foundations as long as your arm, including causes that range from AIDS and animals to refugees and weapons reduction.

As if that weren't enough, for his day job Will performs acts of heroic altruism. In fact, his RAF Valley base in North Wales is just 80 miles from the University of Liverpool where Robin Dunbar argued that young men perform such brave and selfless deeds because young women prefer

such men as mates. All this and then Will is also second in line to the throne, with all the Big Man kudos that brings. What more could a girl want?

For many admirers, the royal wedding itself will be just the beginning of a decades-long relationship with Kate and Will. For a while at least, they are likely to be the most famous couple ever. Inspired by the romance and history of the British monarchy, and enabled by smartphones and internet access, hoards of people around the globe will follow every speech, interview, giggle and gaff the golden duo makes.

No doubt, advances in technology will change the rules of engagement. In years to come, royal watchers will probably be gripped by the antics of the geno-paparazzi – titillated by their attempts to steal royal DNA contained within a strand of hair left in a restaurant or ski chalet, or intrigued by the publication online of a Kate or Will genome. Perhaps a black market will even offer replica Kate eggs, Will sperm, or baby clones of either. They may end up having many more children than they know. Such are the perils of celebrity and good genes. More felicitously, wealth and high status mean that Will and Kate may also be among the first to benefit from breakthrough research in longevity. By the time they reach middle age, the science should have made enough progress to keep them alive and youthful well into the 22nd century.

So, expect to see a lot more of this couple, everywhere, and for a very long time to come. On the occasion of their wedding, may we wish Will and Kate many children, and long life and happiness. I think they have a surprisingly good chance of all three.

Appendix:

Most human courtships recapitulate humanity's sexual evolution to some degree, but this royal courtship is especially rich in Darwinian undertones:

Kate Middleton's beauty first caught Prince Will's attention at St Andrews University, where David Perrett runs the world's leading lab on the Darwinian aesthetics of facial beauty. They were sitting in an art history class, with luminous works of beauty projected on a wall in a darkened room, as if admiring Paleolithic cave paintings by torch-light.

Kate and Will outwitted their sexual rivals to obtain each other's affections in the same university where primatologists Andrew Whiten and Richard Byrne developed the idea that Machiavellian intelligence in great apes and humans evolved largely through social and sexual competition. Will proposed to Kate on holiday in the Lewa Wildlife Conservancy, Kenya, near the geographical center of human evolution; Will has said "Africa is my second home". The couple will be wedded by the Primate of All England, Rowan Williams, a.k.a. the Archbishop of Canterbury, a progressive theologian who has criticized schools for teaching creationism as an alternative to evolution.

They will marry at Westminster Abbey, just a couple of miles from Francis Galton's old Eugenics Laboratory at University College London and a few meters away from Darwin's burial place.