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Joan Rivers and Queen Elizabeth

On June 5, 2012 two Queens of a certain age engaged with adoring audiences.

by Marleen Barr
October 9, 2012



*When you enter Ms. Rivers's triplex [Manhattan apartment], the first thing you notice is that she has a giant ballroom, with 23-foot ceilings and gilded columns. ... Rivers proudly describes her home as 'Louis XIV meets Fred and Ginger' --Elizabeth Harris, 'For Comedian, Leading Her Condo Board Is a Serious Matter,' *The New York Times*, June 12, 2012, A 22*

On June 5, 2012 two Queens of a certain age engaged with adoring audiences: Joan Rivers, the Queen of stand-up comedy, appeared at the Barnes & Noble flagship store in Manhattan and Elizabeth, THE Queen, celebrated her diamond jubilee throughout London. Throngs cheered the Queen as she stood on the Buckingham Palace balcony. Although the Barnes & Noble event space holds less people than The Mall in London, the capacity crowd which greeted Rivers was as fervently enthusiastic as Britain's revelers. People of all ages responded to Rivers with a joyful and awestruck standing ovation. Because female senior citizens are so seldom publicly celebrated, it is interesting to draw a comparison between the reverent attention both Rivers and the Queen routinely receive.

The appreciation furor directed at both women signals a changed perception of older women's role in society. And both figures have also impacted upon the women who generationally come after them. Female popular culture provocateurs such as Kathy Griffin and Bethenny Frankel are following in Rivers' in-your-face verbal style footsteps. A recently changed succession law will enable William and Kates' potential first born daughter to become Queen.

It is true that Rivers and the Queen are not usually discussed in terms of their similarities. The Queen is not a Brooklyn Jew. She does not routinely lace her remarks with the 'F' word. She does not wear ostentatious over the top attire. She is associated with red coated bear hat wearing palace guards, not the fashion police. The differences between these two women smack of a Rivers comedy routine.

Even though the gulf separating them is analogous to the distinction between the River Thames and the Gowanus Canal, they do not lack commonality. Windsor Castle is furnished with décor the French aristocracy jettisoned in the wake of the Revolution; as the above New York Times description indicates, Rivers' \$29.5 million palatial Manhattan apartment resembles Versailles-on-the-Hudson. Both Rivers and the Queen wear exceedingly gaudy jewelry. The Queen works with her children and grandchildren. Ditto for Rivers's professional relationship with her daughter Melissa and grandson Cooper. The Queen was anointed, not appointed; Johnny Carson anointed Rivers.

These women also share life altering events in common. Both have had to transcend family tragedy. When Rivers's husband Edgar committed suicide, she experienced her particular version of the shock of Princess Diana's unexpected death.

Both women have spent their lives traveling the world. The Queen exemplifies Rivers's philosophy that it is necessary to 'keep moving' in response to the vicissitudes of life. The point is that the Queen and Rivers share similar remarkable attributes. Regardless of their age, regardless of everything, they have long endured. After relentlessly and tirelessly enacting public performances, they seem to defy time. Perseverance is their watch word. Like another Queen, Shakespeare's Cleopatra, 'age cannot wither' them in the face of their continuous popularity. Or, in terms of a less literary cliché, 'neither snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom of night stays these couriers from their appointed rounds.'

It is then not an exaggeration to say that the Queen and Rivers are of the same ilk. The Queen might agree. Rivers, after all, participated in the Seventy-Ninth Royal Variety Command Performance (December 3, 2007, Liverpool Empire Theater). She was one of four Americans invited to the Royal Wedding. Even though it is unthinkable to expect the Queen to dress and speak like Rivers, she is not not amused by the comedian.

God save the Queen of England and the Queen of stand-up comedy. Long may they reign. Their shows must go on. When they perform, they serve as role models who enhance women's lives. Everyday marks their jubilee.