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Being Lord Grantham: Aristocratic Brand Heritage and the Cunard Transatlantic Crossing

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1 Highclere Castle as Downton Abbey (Photo by Gill Griffin)

By Bradford Hudson

During the early 1920s, the Earl of Grantham traveled from England to the United States. The British aristocrat would appear as a character witness for his American brother-in-law, who was a defendant in a trial related to the notorious Teapot Dome political scandal. Naturally he chose to travel aboard a British ship operated by the oldest and most prestigious transatlantic steamship company, the Cunard Line. Befitting his privileged status, Lord Grantham was accompanied by a valet from the extensive staff employed at his manor house, who would attend to any personal needs such as handling baggage or assistance with dressing.

Aboard the great vessel, which resembled a fine hotel more than a ship, passengers were assigned to accommodations and dining facilities in one of three different classes of service. Ostensibly the level of luxury was determined solely by price, but the class system also reflected a subtle degree of social status. Guests in the upper classes dressed formally for dinner, with men wearing white or black tie and women wearing ball gowns. Those who had served in the military or diplomatic service sometimes wore their medals or other decorations. Passengers enjoyed elaborate menu items such as chateaubriand and oysters Rockefeller, served in formal style by waiters in traditional livery. The décor throughout the vessel resembled a private club in London or an English country manor house, with ubiquitous references to the British monarchy and empire.

The preceding passage represents a literary sleight of hand. The first paragraph is a fictional account excerpted from the historical television drama *Downton Abbey*. The series is a phenomenon in the United States, becoming the most popular show in the history of the Public Broadcasting System and attracting more than 10 million viewers for the premiere in recent seasons. The second paragraph is a factual account derived from a few years ago, during field research conducted by the author aboard the Cunard cruise ship *Queen Mary 2*, including

observation of passengers who were predominantly Americans from the socioeconomic middle class.

The retrospective nature of the television series and the shipboard experience raise interesting questions. Why would a significant number of modern viewers in America, which rebelled against the British monarchy and subsequently introduced its own system of egalitarian democracy, become so devoted to a drama focused on a member of the British peerage and his family a century ago? Why would a significant number of modern tourists from America choose such a slow, expensive and outmoded method of transportation to visit Europe?

A single answer to both questions involves the interplay of consumer psychology (especially status), luxury branding, heritage tourism and brand heritage. Before exploring how such concepts manifest themselves aboard Cunard vessels, it would be useful to quickly review the theoretical background of each of these ideas.

Status

Recent growth in the technology sector and a healthy stock market have contributed to an increase in the number of extremely wealthy individuals and the creation of an economic superclass unseen since the Gilded Age. Nonetheless, the current ethic in American society is decidedly egalitarian. In the marketplace, consumers have embraced disruptive startups such as Airbnb and Uber, while members of younger generations are rejecting products and services offered by established brands. In the political arena, a philosophy of social justice is increasingly influential among voters and critics, with broadened ideas about the inclusion of groups and individuals formerly in the social periphery, and renewed concerns about income inequality. This all suggests that social hierarchy is not only conceptual, with the implication that it is optional, but also obsolete and harmful.

Regardless of our personal ideals about equality, there is reason to believe that social status is a natural element of the human condition. Anthropologists such as Donald Brown and Alan Fiske have demonstrated that hierarchy is evident in every type of society and is a fundamental element of human social relationships. Mark van Vugt, a professor of evolutionary psychology at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam and a research associate at the University of Oxford, argues that status behaviors have been embedded in human anatomy through evolutionary processes, as a means of managing the effects of social interaction on the competition for resources necessary for survival and reproduction.

In Europe one thousand years ago, social status was highly stratified. Members of the nobility controlled vast areas of land, and often legal and regulatory systems within those regions, which produced not only disproportionate economic wealth, but also the literal power of life or death over subjects within their domains. Aristocrats had virtually unlimited degrees of freedom, compared to those at lower levels in the social hierarchy. Enjoying the favor of royalty or even a local land baron had tangible consequences for commoners.

This social structure changed significantly as modern capitalist democracies emerged, but the vestiges remain to this day, especially in Britain. The Queen maintains certain duties and privileges in law, a portion of seats in the House of Lords are reserved for hereditary peers,

members of the socioeconomic elite aspire to be elevated to the peerage themselves, commoners often defer to members of the nobility in everyday social situations, and vast numbers of people enthusiastically attend public events for members of the royal family.

Social hierarchy is also evident in the United States today. Although not codified in law, there is certainly an informal socioeconomic class system. Higher status is signaled not only by the accumulation and display of wealth, in part through the conspicuous consumption of material objects, but also through education and celebrity. A 'Harvard' sticker on the back window of an automobile serves much the same purpose today as wearing an ermine robe a millennium ago. Entertainment figures have joined hereditary royalty among the most privileged class, with 'selfie' moments replacing the more traditional 'royal audience'.

A variety of authors have explored the paradoxical fascination that Americans have demonstrated for the British monarchy and nobility since the American Revolution. Arianne Chernock, a historian at Boston University, contends that the popularity of the royal family during visits to the United States "suggests a deep affective tie" between Americans and the British aristocracy. Rupert Cornwell asserts this is driven by an innate desire for pomp and circumstance, which is evident in the atmospherics of our own imperial presidency. Theodore Dalrymple, writing about the appeal of *Downton Abbey* in particular, suggests that its depiction of the British class system is "like indulging in a guilty passion" and that "Americans uneasily both accept and reject the hereditary principle."



2 Hugh Bonneville as Lord Grantham and Michelle Dockery as Lady Mary (Image: Corbis)

Luxury

Luxury is a seemingly straightforward concept, but is actually a complex form of consumer behavior, and represents its own sub-discipline in marketing. Most observers agree that the

theoretical elements of luxury include high price and high quality, and many also include the notions of rarity and hedonistic indulgence. Jean-Noël Kapferer, the highly regarded luxury expert at HEC Paris, concurs that these elements are necessary components of luxury. However, he also argues they are not entirely sufficient to differentiate luxury dynamics from other forms of consumer behavior.

High price and high quality are evident in premium products, which are a step above everyday products, but are not particularly rare or exceptional (such as Coach leather goods). Although many luxury products have an indulgent dimension, hedonistic benefits can be ascribed to numerous common brands and products (such as Hershey's chocolate). The functional aspect of quality includes consistency and effectiveness, but these characteristics can be found in a multitude of inexpensive and common products (such as Gillette razors). The sophistication aspect of quality includes intricacy and aesthetics, but these characteristics can be found in products for the mass market (such as the Apple iPhone).

Kapferer argues that the unique defining characteristic of luxury is status. The consumption of luxury products is an expression of social hierarchy, in which consumers signal their status position to themselves and to others. They also engage in a form of connoisseurship about status itself, rather than about the characteristics of the related luxury product. Consumers define their own identities partly by interacting emotionally or intellectually with a product or its brand.

From this viewpoint, it is no accident that most luxury products originate from European countries with rigid systems of social stratification, including nobility and in many cases monarchy. This is true for England currently and for France, Italy and Germany historically. The interrelationship of luxury and monarchy is quite evident in the system of royal warrants still used in Britain, which involves the display of personal coats of arms to indicate the endorsement of commercial products by the royal family.

Heritage

History has traditionally been regarded as an objective and factual account of past events. In contrast, the post-modernist viewpoint suggests that history is a subjective activity, in which verifiable facts are interpreted and assembled into a myriad of plausible narratives, depending on the creativity and biases of each author. In this sense, history not only offers perspective on the past, but it also reflects the cultural conditions of the present.

Almost a century ago, sociological pioneer George Herbert Mead developed the theory of symbolic interactionism. This proposed that personal identity is defined and refined through an iterative process, in which we repeatedly compare and contrast ourselves against other people or objects. Mead argued that history was a key element of this process, because we compare ourselves (and others) in the present to ourselves (and others) in the past.

The concept of heritage refers to objects, ideas or traditions that have been inherited from prior eras or ancestors. Although history and heritage are certainly related, they are not identical. The geographer David Lowenthal argues that heritage involves a selective and subjective interpretation of past events (consistent with the post-modernist view of history),

which is operative in defining collective identity (consistent with identity formation in symbolic interactionism).

Heritage Tourism

Heritage tourism involves travel to historic sites (such as Stonehenge) or collections of historical artifacts (such as the British Museum). It also involves the creation and operation of these sites or collections. This represents a distinct specialization in the academic discipline of tourism, with a vast body of literature and its own publications, such as the *Journal of Heritage Tourism*.

A common theme in this scholarship is the role of heritage in the process of defining and celebrating the collective identity of communities and nations. Lowenthal is cited frequently in this regard. Mead is usually absent, but such discussions build upon his pioneering work, by arguing that the past is integral to symbolic interactionism. In other words, a society defines its identity partly through the interpretation of historical events and artifacts.

An interesting variant of heritage tourism involves historical role playing. This phenomenon combines travel with the reenactment of historical events or periods, often including elaborate costumes and interpretive presentations. This may involve a formal performance for an external audience (such as a reenactment of the Battle of Gettysburg), a group activity for the internal consumption of participants (such as the Jane Austen Regency Ball in Bath), or even a private moment of reflection by an individual (such as a passenger aboard the Venice Simplon Orient Express).

A number of scholars in different disciplines, ranging from Russell Belk in marketing to Jerome de Groot in history, have argued that historical role playing behavior has complex motivations. At a simple level, participants are seeking amusement in a format that is more immersive and sensory than a book or movie. At a deeper level, participants may be escaping from their mundane everyday lives into a fantasy world that is more satisfying or stimulating, or engaging in mythological rituals that help define or reinforce their sense of personal or collective identity.

Brand Heritage

Brand heritage is an emerging topic within the marketing discipline, which suggests that the historical status of older companies or products may be explicitly linked to their brand identity and consumer appeal. Examples of marketing related to heritage include the citation of company founding dates on packaging, the celebration of corporate anniversaries, references to a company in historical context, or the display of iconic artifacts in possession of the company. It could even include the creation of updated products that incorporate visual elements from prior versions, or the design of new offerings that refer to idealized or artificial memories of historical reality.

Mats Urde, Stephen Greyser, and John Balmer have argued that older brands require a different approach to brand management than younger brands. Activities related to brand heritage include uncovering aspects of heritage through archival and consumer research, activating that heritage through product design and marketing communications, and protecting that heritage through stewardship and attention to continuity.

My own prior scholarship on brand heritage (some of which was conducted in partnership with Stephen Greyser at Harvard Business School and John Balmer at Brunel University in London) has explored these themes extensively. This has included development of a theoretical model that applies the conceptual work of Mead to corporate brands, in an attempt to explain why consumers might find heritage to be a compelling value proposition. The model (published in *Corporate Communications*) divides the concept of brand heritage into several theoretical components. At the broadest level, it suggests that heritage has 'innate' and 'projected' dimensions.

Innate heritage refers to the historical aspects of the brand itself, such as the personalities of founders or iconic product designs. These are symbols used to activate associations with the company in order to support differentiation through claims about pioneership, dependability, or expertise. In this sense, heritage is an element of brand identity.

Projected heritage refers to a psychological phenomenon in which consumers project their own historical associations onto a company or its products. The brand becomes an instrument of existential definition in a process of symbolic interaction. In other words, the brand is merely a prop, used by consumers to help define or refine their own personal identities. A key element in projected heritage is nostalgia, which involves positive or bittersweet memories about or longing for moments in the past.

Projected heritage has two subsidiary components, 'reconstructed heritage' and 'mythical heritage.' In reconstructed heritage, consumers use branding elements to activate memories about events or eras that were actually experienced at earlier points in their own lives (such as a person who remembers his grandfather whenever he drinks Coca-Cola from a glass bottle). In mythical heritage, consumers use branding elements to activate fantasies about historical events or eras that were not actually experienced by the consumers themselves. These could be real historical references (such as travel along Route 66 during the 1950s) or fictional references with historical aspects (such as the Harry Potter series of films).

Before moving onward, it is worth noting that heritage tourism and brand heritage are not only related theoretically, but they also can be found together in the world of hospitality. As noted in one of my prior articles for *Boston Hospitality Review*, historic hotels are businesses with historic brands and also physical structures that can be visited. Historic hotels are often destinations in themselves for enthusiasts of business, social or architectural history. This also applies to other segments of the hospitality sector that have physical characteristics including restaurants, theme parks, and cruise lines.

Cunard Line

Cunard is one of the oldest and most famous passenger transportation companies in the world. It was founded in 1840 by Samuel Cunard, who was a Canadian living in London. The enterprise was originally called the 'British and North America Royal Mail Steam Packet Company' to reflect the importance of a lucrative contract with the British government to carry mail to Nova Scotia and Boston. The name was subsequently changed to the simpler 'Cunard Line' and the company eventually merged with the White Star Line in 1934.

Cunard emerged as the leader on the transatlantic route and its brand eventually attained iconic status, representing the glamor and exclusivity of a golden age of adventure and affluence. Among the famous ships in its combined corporate lineage were *Lusitania* (first voyage 1907), *Titanic* (1912), *Queen Mary* (1936), and *Queen Elizabeth* (1940). The earlier ships were the transportation method of choice for European nobility and American millionaires, while the later vessels also had associations with Hollywood movie stars.

Prior to the jet age, ocean liners were the primary mode of transportation across the Atlantic Ocean. However, after regular transatlantic flights were introduced in 1958, the passenger shipping industry declined precipitously. Cunard survived by reimagining itself as a leisure cruise line, with the newly built *Queen Elizabeth 2* (1969) as its flagship. Nonetheless, the financial health of the company continued to stagnate, as it faced strong competition from newer and more aggressive operators.

The Cunard brand was eventually acquired by the American shipping conglomerate Carnival Cruise Line in 1998. Carnival was founded only two decades earlier as a discount cruise line serving the Caribbean, but grew quickly into a portfolio of cruise brands in various product categories and geographic markets. Cunard would be its marquis brand in the luxury segment.

Carnival chief executive Micky Arison was well aware of the historical status of the company and its ships, having immigrated to the United States as a child aboard a Cunard vessel. The blockbuster film *Titanic* had also become a cultural phenomenon during the year preceding the acquisition, and Arison detected an opportunity to capitalize on the romance and nostalgia related to steamships and the Belle Époque.

Cunard was subsequently repositioned on the basis of its heritage, to offer a retrospective consumer experience involving classic design and traditional shipboard activities. The reconstituted Cunard company built the new ship *Queen Mary 2* as an homage to the great Cunard and White Star liners of the past. In addition to its classic appearance, the ship was designed with the scale and functionality of an ocean liner from a prior era, capable of withstanding the punishing conditions of the North Atlantic and constituting the largest passenger vessel ever built at the time of its launching.

A few years later, the company built the smaller ships *Queen Victoria* and *Queen Elizabeth* (the third Cunard vessel to bear this name) to complete its fleet. These shared the classic interior décor and exterior paint scheme of *Queen Mary 2*, but such design elements were cosmetic, as the ships were intended for more typical cruising routes in the Caribbean and Mediterranean.



3 *Queen Mary 2* (Photo courtesy of Cunard Line)

The Transatlantic Crossing

Cunard continues to offer regularly scheduled transatlantic service, as it has every year since 1840, and enjoys the distinction of being the only modern cruise line to do so. Originally the entire fleet served the route connecting Liverpool and Boston throughout the calendar year. Today the route between Southampton and New York is served primarily by *Queen Mary 2* and only during the summer season.

The value proposition for passengers aboard any modern cruise ship, regardless of destination, is multidimensional. Guests are motivated by a combination of hedonistic desires (indulging in gourmet dining or spa treatments), nautical interests (observing shipboard operations or the open ocean), practical considerations (inclusive pricing systems or reduced baggage handling across multiple destinations), and simple curiosity.

The transatlantic crossing aboard *Queen Mary 2* offers two additional benefits, which are unique in the cruise industry. The first is functional, specifically the ability to travel from the United States to Europe on a regularly scheduled basis, without flying on an airplane. Although this is a determinant factor in the buying decision for passengers with aviophobia, this market segment is small and cannot generate the demand necessary to fill the gigantic ship on a weekly basis.

The second benefit is mythological, specifically the opportunity to travel backward in time, albeit in the imagination. *Queen Mary 2* resembles an elaborate movie set or an immersive ride at a Disney theme park, designed to elicit associations with a particular historical period (the

age of steam power) and a distinct national identity (British). The cues intended to activate such associations are everywhere.

The exterior is painted in classic livery with a black hull, a white superstructure, and a red smoke funnel. The interior décor mixes the Georgian style of an English country manor, the art nouveau and Edwardian styles found in early Cunard liners such as *Lusitania*, and the art deco style of the original *Queen Mary*.

Historical displays can be found throughout the ship. These include multiple ship models and nautical oil paintings, as well as the original silver trophy presented by the people of Boston to Samuel Cunard upon the arrival of *Britannia* in 1840. The 'Maritime Quest' exhibit comprises numerous display panels mounted on walls throughout the ship, which describe the biography of Samuel Cunard and the history of the Cunard Line. These panels include historical narratives and reproductions of images from vintage photographs, advertisements, and brochures in a manner reminiscent of a museum.

The historical approach also extends to shipboard activities and behavioral programming. During the day, passengers can play shuffleboard on the upper deck, attend lectures about topics such as the Battle of Waterloo, and experience afternoon tea served by waiters in white gloves. During the evening, they can indulge in gourmet meals, enjoy ballroom dancing, and attend formal balls given periodically on many voyages. The ship has a dress code for public areas and formal attire is recommended during the evening, with tuxedo rentals available onboard. Passengers are even encouraged (in the dress guidelines provided with the boarding packet) to wear military medals with their formal attire. Related shore excursions have recently included a tour of Highclere Castle, the real country estate used to portray the fictional Downton Abbey.

Although some of these historical elements are shared by other Cunard vessels, the transatlantic voyage aboard *Queen Mary 2* has special status, both in the minds of guests with historical interests and in the marketing communications from Cunard. Passengers must consciously opt into this anachronistic and inefficient form of travel, rather than follow the crowd in the default method of air travel. As Cunard says on its current website, "Transatlantic Crossings [are] the grandest way to reach England" and offer a "unique adventure" with a "sense of escapism [that] is unrivalled." One of the current Cunard brochures asserts that "crossing the Atlantic is more than a cruise, it's one of travel's great rites of passage."

Aristocratic Heritage

To prepare for this article, the author conducted informal discussions with consumers during field research aboard Cunard vessels. This included dozens of passengers, of all ages, in all classes of service, aboard two different vessels, during three different voyages including two transatlantic crossings, over the span of two decades. Although the majority of passengers were American, many were also citizens of the United Kingdom or British Commonwealth countries. This yielded results that were both interesting and consistent.

When asked about their motivations for choosing their mode of travel, the overwhelming majority of passengers indicated they had chosen the Cunard Line specifically, rather than having been directed to Cunard based on a vague inquiry to a travel professional. On the

transatlantic crossings in particular, every passenger had intentionally chosen Cunard. Among those who proactively chose Cunard, with the exception of those claiming to have aviophobia, every passenger voiced a strong interest in the heritage of the brand. Brand heritage was the universal determinant factor in the buying decision.

When asked to describe the heritage of the brand, most guests were quite well informed about multiple aspects of history related to the company and its ships. A majority of respondents subsequently linked the history of the brand to people who had been passengers aboard Cunard ships in the past. Such references included specific individuals (such as the Duke and Duchess of Windsor) and also more generalized groups of people. The most common types of people mentioned were European royalty, British nobility, American millionaires, and movie stars (in that order).

Interestingly, the respondents most likely to mention European royalty or nobility were members of the American socioeconomic middle class. They were fascinated with the British royal family and were attracted to royal iconography, including photographs and artifacts throughout the ship, as well as the royal elements embedded in the design of company logos and crew uniforms. When asked subtly about their political or ideological beliefs, many tended toward egalitarianism and none claimed to be a neo-monarchist. These people did not want to live as subjects under a monarch, they merely wanted to experience the pomp and circumstance of monarchy as tourists.

Many of the people interviewed subsequently revealed hidden fantasies about being members of royalty or nobility themselves. Such fantasies seemed quite meaningful to the respondents, but they were also rather weak in terms of intensity. Furthermore, everyone seemed to clearly understand that such thoughts were imaginary whims with no connection to reality (unlike for example, the possibility of winning a gigantic lottery prize). These were simply entertaining daydreams, akin to fanaticizing about being Tom Brady while watching a Patriots football game.

Aristocratic aspirations often surfaced or re-surfaced during evening formal events. Engaging in atypical behaviors circumscribed by tradition and etiquette, combined with physical manifestations in the form of fancy dress, clearly activated such associations. Passengers were in costume, playing the roles of imagined counterparts aboard famous ocean liners of yesteryear.

In the film *Titanic*, there is an extended scene in which one of the protagonists has dinner in the first class saloon. Jack Dawson is a young and penniless artist traveling in third class, who is invited to dine with a group of British aristocrats and American millionaires. He is loaned formal attire and joins his hosts around a large table. The scene that unfolds thereafter has two conflicting implications. On the one hand, Jack is subjected to denigrating snobbery from the rich villain, which plays into hackneyed narratives about class warfare and evil robber barons. On the other hand, Jack responds deftly and defends himself effectively, winning the admiration of his love interest Rose and several other wealthy guests, suggesting that anyone can attain a seat at the table based on merit.

More subtle, but nonetheless unmistakably embedded in this scene, is the idea that Jack enjoys being at the table. Although sometimes uncertain and uncomfortable, he revels in being magnificently attired and indulging in fine cuisine. In the following scene, Jack and Rose switch

places, attending a raucous and bawdy impromptu dance in the third class section of the ship. This underscores rather than invalidates what happened previously. Jack had earlier donned a costume and played a role. His motivations included curiosity, a sense of adventure, a desire for amusement, a bit of self-aggrandizing fantasy, and (of course) a desire to continue interacting with Rose. The scene in first class works for the audience, not only because it makes palpable the tensions in the socioeconomic class system of the era, but also because part of every teenager (a key demographic in the financial success of the film) wants to have the status, wealth, beauty and freedom of an aristocrat.

Conclusion

The transatlantic crossing aboard *Queen Mary 2* offers an excellent case study in aristocratic brand heritage. Many passengers aboard Cunard vessels today are consciously participating in elaborate historical role playing, engaging in behaviors that they would rarely or never repeat in their normal lives. This is motivated by fantasies related to socioeconomic status, especially a desire by Americans to escape their modern egalitarian existence and momentarily become members of the British aristocracy in a mythologized past. Such passengers are not only engaging in an immersive form of amusement, but they are also projecting their own historical associations upon the Cunard brand, to define or refine their own personalities through a process of symbolic interaction.

Every viewer of *Downton Abbey* does not necessarily imagine being a character in the series, nor does every such fantasy involve Lord Grantham or another member of the Crawley family. Some viewers undoubtedly identify more closely with staff members below stairs, such as the scullery maid Daisy. Similarly, every passenger aboard a Cunard ship does not necessarily imagine being a character from history or historical fiction, nor does every such fantasy involve the Duke or Duchess of Windsor. Some passengers undoubtedly identify more closely with the penniless artist Jack Dawson or his love interest Rose, who fanaticizes about escaping from her gilded cage to disappear in the everyday world.

Nonetheless, a significant number of *Downton Abbey* viewers and Cunard passengers have aristocratic fantasies. The producers of the television series and the executives of the cruise line seem to understand this, at least intuitively, and deliver the related psychic benefits that their audiences desire. Aristocratic heritage represents a distinct value proposition for certain types of consumers, provides a point of differentiation within an increasingly egalitarian world, and is enabled by unique historical narratives that are difficult for competitors to copy. In other words, it offers a basis for strategic positioning.

Executives of firms whose brands reside at the intersection of heritage and luxury should consider the phenomenon of aristocratic heritage, and perhaps develop brand positions or marketing communications that subtly embrace and celebrate such fantasies. For companies in any industry, this would involve the 'projected mythical heritage' dimension of brand heritage in the discipline of marketing. For companies in the hospitality and tourism industries more specifically, this would involve the interplay of brand heritage with a variety of theoretical principles from the field of heritage tourism.

About the sources

This article is based on the extensive prior scholarship of the author and his colleagues in the field of brand heritage. Notable among these is Bradford Hudson, “Brand Heritage and the Renaissance of Cunard” in *European Journal of Marketing* (2011), Bradford Hudson and John Balmer, “Corporate Heritage Brands: Mead’s Theory of the Past” in *Corporate Communications* (2013), and Bradford Hudson, “Brand Heritage and Heritage Tourism” in *Boston Hospitality Review* (2013). This article is also informed by the personal experiences of the author as a management consultant to the Cunard Line (1992), and as a passenger aboard *Queen Elizabeth 2* (1992) and *Queen Mary 2* (2008), including two transatlantic crossings. It should be noted that *Queen Mary 2* is scheduled for a shipyard refit later this year, which will reportedly include updates to the interior décor, and therefore some visual symbolism relating to the brand position could be altered going forward.

Abstract

The historical television series *Downton Abbey*, based on a fictional member of the British peerage and his family, has become a phenomenon in the United States. Cunard is one of the oldest and most famous passenger transportation companies in the world. Among the ships in its corporate lineage are *Lusitania*, *Titanic* and *Queen Mary*. This article explores theoretical parallels between the show and the cruise line, especially the historical aspects of social hierarchy. The author argues that the value proposition for passengers aboard modern Cunard ships such as *Queen Mary 2* is complex. Although some guests are motivated by hedonistic or functional benefits unconnected to heritage, many are consciously participating in elaborate historical role playing. Such behavior is motivated by fantasies related to socioeconomic status, especially a desire by Americans to escape their modern egalitarian existence and become members of the English aristocracy in a mythologized past.



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