

“He Is(n’t) One of Us”: Liminality and the Sons-in-Law in *Downton Abbey*

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Phillip J. Jones, MA, MS
Associate Librarian
University of Arkansas
pjj01@uark.edu

“He isn’t one of us.” Lady Mary’s scathing rejection of Matthew Crawley in the phenomenally popular television program *Downton Abbey* captures the social distance between an earl’s eldest daughter in 1912 and her middle-class fourth cousin, the new heir presumptive to her father’s earldom and estate. Her words could also apply to the family’s new chauffeur, Tom Branson, an Irish radical more keen on Lady Sybil, the earl’s youngest daughter, than driving the family’s car. The media are quick to identify *Downton* as a story of metamorphosis, but the arcs of Matthew and Tom are more than an evolution. Both men’s journeys, one from obscure solicitor to earl’s heir presumptive and son-in-law, and the other from servant to son-in-law, show a richness, which this paper will compare and contrast. The program is a fascinating study of liminality: each man’s contested passage takes the viewer into a vivid realm of betwixt and between. The theoretical insights of selected social scientists and humanists, including the seminal work of the late anthropologist Victor Turner, can enrich our understanding of *Downton*. In turn, a critical reading of this program can broaden the definition of liminality.

The paper commences with an overview of selected relevant literature on liminality, beginning with the contributions of Arnold van Gennep and continuing with Turner and others. The largest and successive section will examine the passages of Matthew Crawley and Tom Branson in *Downton*. Thereafter the paper will revisit the work of the theorists to look more closely at the stories of Matthew and Tom to identify how their passages are liminal and how they depart from liminality—a slippery construct. This paper also will examine liminality in *Downton* as a whole before concluding with a comparison of the United Kingdom in the 1910s and the United States in the 2010s to suggest why the show resonates with American audiences.

Literature on Liminality

Liminality is derived from the Latin *limen*, or threshold. Charles La Shure, a scholar of Korean literature, in his accessible overview of liminality, notes that the *Oxford English Dictionary* traces the term “liminal” back to the field of psychology in 1884, but Arnold van Gennep was the first anthropologist to use the term. In *Les rites de passage*, published in 1909, van Gennep identified three phases of rites through which subjects passed: separation (*séparation*), transition (*marge*), and incorporation (*agrégation*) (vii). As an example, in his analysis of the Toda people of India, he limned the rituals that separate a woman in the early stages of pregnancy from the community, those that she performs while she lives apart in the transitional (liminal) period, and the final rites by which the community reincorporates her after the birth (42–43). A product of his time, Van Gennep analyzed his subject with a positivist lens (vii). Although he introduced the term liminality into ethnography, the concept is a small

fraction of his investigation of rites of passage, with relatively few entries in the book's index (196–97). After his text was translated into English in 1960, liminality gained a foothold in Anglophone ethnography.

Borrowing from Van Gennep, the anthropologist Victor Turner incorporated the three phases that his predecessor had identified, but turned the spotlight on liminality. Turner's work informs much of the writing on the topic today.¹ This paper will address points salient to a reading of *Downton Abbey*. In "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in *Rites de Passage*," the fourth chapter of his *Forest of Symbols*, Turner states, "*Rites de passage* are found in all societies but tend to reach their maximal expression in small-scale, relatively stable and cyclical societies, where change is bound up with biological and meteorological rhythms and recurrences rather than with technological innovations. Such rites indicate and constitute transitions between states" (93). The rites "are not restricted . . . to movements between ascribed statuses. They also concern entry into a new achieved status, whether this be a political office or membership of an exclusive club or secret society" (95). Turner distinguishes ritual from ceremony: the former "is transformative, ceremony confirmatory" (95). In other words, the rite *confers* the new status. Liminal persons (i.e., neophytes) are interstructural and problematic: "[t]hey are at once no longer classified and not yet classified" (96). Drawing on the work of Mary Douglas, Turner posits that persons in the liminal state are regarded as unclean, polluting (97). Another negative quality, nothingness, characterizes transitional beings: "[t]hey have no status, property, insignia, secular clothing, rank, kinship position, nothing to demarcate them structurally from their fellows" (98–99). Tribal elders have the authority in these rites: "authority of the elders is absolute, because it represents the absolute, the axiomatic values of

society in which are expressed the 'common good' and the common interest" (100). Turner ascribes a degree of liberty and comradeship during the liminal period, when neophytes "are not acting institutionalized roles" (101). The neophyte does not simply acquire knowledge, but undergoes a "change in being" (102). The liminal period is one of reflection. Neophytes are "divested of their previous habits of thought, feeling, and action. During the liminal period, neophytes are alternately forced and encouraged to think about their society, their cosmos, and the powers that generate and shape them" (105).

In a later work, *The Ritual Process*, Turner emphasizes the ambiguity of liminal persons: these "entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial" (95). Neophytes experience "communitas," a relatively unstructured, non-hierarchical phase of community (96). He contrasts communitas with the "status system" in a strict binary opposition (106). Communitas is transitional: "men are released from structure into communitas only to return to structure revitalized by their experience of communitas" (129). Communitas also exists outside liminality (109). Persons can exist on the margins of society and others can inhabit a permanent inferior status (109–11, 125). Turner also introduces permanent liminality, in which "[t]ransition has . . . become a permanent condition" (107). Examples include monastic and mendicant life in the major religions. He explores this position in detail in his overview of the early Franciscans (145–47). This broadening of liminality has garnered criticism. As La Shure writes, "If you are going to admit that someone can be in a temporary state his or her entire life, why bother insisting that the state is temporary . . . ?"

Turner fleshes out the manifestations of *communitas* more fully in *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors*. In addition to the standard liminality in rites of passage—whose inhabitants he defines here as “liminars” or “passengers” (232)—two categories are of particular use to an analysis of *Downton*. Turner defines “outsiderhood” as

either permanently and by ascription set outside the structural arrangements of a given social system, or being situationally or temporarily set apart, or voluntarily setting oneself apart from the behavior of status-occupying, role-playing members of that system. Such outsiders would include, in various cultures, shamans, diviners, mediums, priests, those in monastic seclusion, hippies, hoboes, and gypsies. (233)

Of greater interest are “marginals,”

who are simultaneously members (by ascription, optation, self-definition, or achievement) of two or more groups whose social definitions and cultural norms are distinct from, and often even opposed to, one another These would include migrant foreigners . . . persons of mixed ethnic origin, parvenus (upwardly mobile marginals) What is interesting about such marginals is that they often look to their group of origin, the so-called inferior group, for *communitas*, and to the more prestigious group in which they mainly live and in which they aspire to higher status as their structural reference group. . . . Usually they are highly conscious and self-conscious people and may produce from their ranks a disproportionately high number of writers, artists, and philosophers. . . . Marginals like liminars are also bewixt and between, but unlike ritual liminars they have no cultural assurance of a final stable resolution of their ambiguity. (233)

Turner also addresses liminoid, a variant of liminal, in his work (14–17), a concept that takes liminality outside a primarily tribal environment and adapts it to complex, contemporary societies. In an essay on play, Turner writes that “crucial differences separate the structure, function, style, scope, and symbology of the liminal in ‘tribal and agrarian ritual and myth’ from what we may perhaps call the ‘liminoid,’ or leisure genres, and symbolic forms and action in

complex, industrial societies” (Turner, *Rice* 72). Examples of liminoid activity include the ceremonies of fraternities and sororities (65). Turner states tersely, “One *works at* the liminal, one *plays with* the liminoid” (86). In short, the liminal is obligatory, unlike the liminoid (73).

Since the work of Victor Turner, the concept of liminality has spread through the social sciences and humanities.² As its use has broadened beyond ethnography, so has its definition. La Shure writes, “[L]iminality proves to be a very slippery concept when it is taken out of the ritual context in which it was first conceived.” This paper will examine three works (an article, a dissertation, a book) of the last decade in two disciplines (communication and literature) that illustrate a broader definition and application of liminality. In their reading of *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, Celeste Lacroix and Robert Westerfelhaus argue that the show is an “inverted rite of passage,” beginning with integration and ending in separation (13). In each episode the five stars, while embarking on a makeover of a “straight guy,” engage with the heterosexual mainstream, pass through a “liminal,” transgressive stage, and then are elevated to the “Loft,” a space of “socio-sexual separation” (13–15). Lacroix and Westerfelhaus’s intriguing extension and reversal of liminality raises several issues. First, in Turner the three phases of the rites of passage are unidirectional and transformative (Turner, *Critical Inquiry* 161). Second, Lacroix and Westerfelhaus make no clear distinction between integration and liminality. What rite demarcates the two phases? Rather, the authors seem to focus on the transgressive aspects of the middle phase of the inverted rites of passage to justify the label “liminal.”

In her dissertation on four Anglo-Irish writers, Adrea McDonnell uses liminality to shed light on the English residents in Ireland, as well as Irish nationhood, on the eve of the Act of

Union (1800), which statutorily incorporated Ireland into the United Kingdom. Her text is relevant to *Downton* on several fronts. It addresses the unique challenges of the construction of Irish nationhood, and the problematic nationality of the Anglo-Irish authors immediately before the Act of Union is similar to that of Tom Branson. McDonnell's use of liminality is also noteworthy. Although she follows Turner's standard chronology in the rites of passage of the Anglo-Irish community (17), when she turns her lens toward the four authors themselves, her portrayal of these subjects appears more in line with Turner's description of marginality, rather than liminality. The women are "migrant foreigners" and "persons of mixed ethnic origin" (Turner, *Dramas* 233). They "like liminars are also bewixt and between, but unlike ritual liminars they have no cultural assurance of a final stable resolution of their ambiguity" (Turner, *Dramas* 233).

The last author, Sandor Klapcsik, expands liminality into the postmodern realm. In his sophisticated readings of four writers of popular fiction, including Agatha Christie, he attributes considerable debt to Turner, as well as Michel Foucault and others. To Klapcsik, liminality is more than a discrete stage along linear rites of passage. He offers three characteristics of liminality in his introduction:

First, I hypothesize a *constant oscillation, crossing back and forth between social and cultural positions*; this might involve the recurring exchanges of attributes between the opposite poles. Second, I imagine liminality as the *space of continuous transference, of a never-ending narrative, forming an infinite process towards an unreachable end*. Third, liminality is created by transgressions, or traversals, across *evanescent, porous, indefinite, ambiguous, evasive borderlines*. (14; italics in the original)

Klapcsik's dense writing makes a challenging read. However, he engages Turner and points out

how he departs from Turner's linearity, as well as which other theorists inform his reworking of liminality. He also shares common ground with La Shure, who writes in acknowledging the difficulty of defining liminality, "[W]here does that leave liminality? Exactly where it started: betwixt and between. It is not outside the social structure or on its edges, it is in the cracks within the social structure itself. . . . Ultimately, liminality . . . is hard to pin down. It is evanescent, like a wisp of smoke in the wind." With the elusiveness of liminality in mind, we turn to *Downton* to consider the passages of Matthew Crawley and Tom Branson.

A Journey: Matthew Crawley

The route of Matthew Crawley from an obscure lawyer in Manchester to acculturated earl-to-be (and earl), albeit dramatic and contested, has well-defined stages and a clear terminus, unlike the journey of Tom Branson. Prior to the narrative, Matthew lived among the professional upper-middle classes of Manchester, England. In 1912 he is an unmarried intellectual man in the early stages of a legal career. As a direct descendant of the third earl of Grantham, he has noble blood, but it is diluted. Reginald, his late father, was an esteemed physician. Isobel, his mother, came from a family of doctors. The audience first sees Matthew and Isobel at the end of the first episode of the first series³ seated at breakfast in their bourgeois, but unostentatious home. An unexpected letter from his late father's third cousin, Robert Crawley, the seventh earl of Grantham, contains a bombshell: Lord Grantham has lost his heir presumptive (a first cousin) and the cousin's son in the sinking of the Titanic. Matthew is now heir presumptive to Grantham's title, estate, and fortune. Lord Grantham invites him to Yorkshire to prepare for the life of a nobleman. Matthew tells his mother uneasily, "He wants

to change our lives.” Matthew’s apprenticeship commences in the second episode when Isobel and he arrive in Downton Village and take up residence in Crawley House.

The dramatic tensions of Matthew’s liminality unfold immediately upon his arrival. Cora, Lady Grantham, is displeased that her entailed dowry will pass to a stranger. Violet, the dowager countess, sees the new heir and his mother as hopelessly *déclassé*, if not threatening to the (i.e., *her*) social order. Lady Mary, the eldest of Grantham’s three daughters, is the most hostile: Matthew is the interloper who will inherit *her* estate. Robert is determined to welcome his distant relative into the fold. But Robert is shocked when Matthew lobs his own surprise at his “new” relatives when they dine together at Downton Abbey for the first time: he has accepted a post as a solicitor in nearby Ripon—news tantamount to a guest belching at the expertly laid table. The ensuing gossip of the servants shows equal disdain. O’Brien, Cora’s lady’s maid, tells Daisy, the kitchen maid, “Gentlemen don’t work, silly. Not *real* gentlemen.” O’Brien later refers to him as “Mr. Nobody from Nowhere.” Mary’s scorn is the sharpest. Matthew works at a “dirty little desk in Ripon,” and she likens doctors and lawyers to “crossing sweeps and draymen.” Her most snobbish comment, to her sisters, Edith and Sybil, “He isn’t one of us,” suggests an impassable chasm, but as the series continues Matthew puts distance between himself and his past; and unlike the case of Tom Branson, the distance between Matthew’s origins and the nobility is measured in feet, not miles.

Even as Matthew acculturates, one foot remains in the professional world. He commutes to work, and there are frequent references to his job in the first series. He avoids some aristocratic ceremony, such as the hunting party of Episode 3, and looks less “tweedy”

than Robert as they traverse the estate. However, he does not appear sorely out of place. Jessica Fellowes notes that Matthew hails from the professional upper-middle classes, which gives him some standing in society (Fellowes, *World* 42). He pointedly corrects Mary's presumption that he cannot ride (Fellowes, *One* 106), much as he puts Thomas in his place when the footman instructs him on a point of formal dining (87). He wears white tie with aplomb. He also begins to temper his values. Although he initially eschews the ministrations of Molesley, his valet and butler, he overcomes his resistance to being "dressed like a doll" and allows Molesley to serve and dress him (129–30). He regularly eats with the Granthams, whom the narrative suggests are his (and Isobel's) sole family and social circle: it offers no scenes with Matthew and Isobel maintaining friendships or familial ties in Manchester, or mingling with Matthew's colleagues.

Matthew's relationships with Robert and Mary evolve significantly in the first series, with implications for Matthew's future. Robert begins to see Matthew as his son. Their bond initially unsettles Mary, who feels supplanted, but in Episode 6 she discovers that Matthew's guarded attraction to her is mutual. He proposes and she asks for time to ponder. Mary also has changed: she is considering marriage to a man who works at a "dirty little desk." The proposal overjoys her parents: a marriage of the fourth cousins should keep Downton and Cora's entailed fortune in their direct lineage and give Mary a position in society as a countess. This brilliant potential match is too straightforward for the drama, and an affective double helix develops, which lasts through the second series. Matthew's status slips in 1914 when Cora learns that she is pregnant: as heir apparent, her son would displace Matthew. The pregnancy complicates Mary's decision. Being the wife of a rural solicitor is not in her plans. Cora's

miscarriage restores Matthew's status. However, sensing the degree to which his position is a factor in Mary's calculus, Matthew withdraws his proposal at a garden party and tells her of his plans to leave the village. Thereafter a real tragedy overshadows the party: Lord Grantham receives a telegram and announces to his guests that the United Kingdom is at war with Germany. The first series ends with a portentous *mise-en-scène* to reflect the tumult, and Isobel and Matthew stand slightly off to the side, suggesting that Downton is no longer their environment.

The second series begins in 1916. Now on duty in France, Matthew has not visited the Granthams. It is Isobel's turn to drop a bombshell: Matthew is engaged to Lavinia Swire, a lawyer's daughter. Robert, Cora, and Violet show dismay but agree to invite Matthew to Downton while he is on leave to re-establish the relationship between heir and family. Robert and Matthew rekindle their bond, and Mary and he are cordial to each other. In spite of her complicated feelings for Matthew, she moves her life forward by seeing Sir Richard Carlisle, a wealthy publisher. Evocative of his status, Matthew arrives at Downton in a scarlet mess jacket—the same apparel as Robert—and tells Lavinia that Downton will be her home one day. His career as earl-to-be is on track.

The mess dress helps establish Matthew's trajectory, and Robert's and his uniforms are richly symbolic and invert their seniority. The uniforms connote aristocratic military service. Robert himself wishes to be called up for active duty. His delight at being summoned leads to dejection when he learns that the post is ceremonial. Robert's uniform points backward to past glory, or "mocks" him (Fellowes and Sturgis 22). Matthew's uniform, in contrast, clothes a

“real” soldier on active duty, and reflects virility and progress, as does his promotion to captain. Even the senior servants at Downton show him respect. O’Brien, who once called him “Mr. Nobody from Nowhere,” corrects the chauffeur Tom Branson, who refers to him as “mister” rather than “captain” (Fellowes, *Two* 173).

Two challenges to Matthew’s status arise in the middle of the second series. First, in the fifth episode he suffers a near-fatal injury in France and returns to Downton. The village doctor diagnoses a spinal transection. Disabled and infertile, Matthew faces a grim future. Second, a rival appears, Patrick Gordon, who claims to be Patrick Crawley, the son of Robert’s cousin, James, both who supposedly perished aboard the Titanic. Matthew is not only “an impotent cripple stinking of sick,” but also without a future earldom. In typical *Downton* fashion, the shadows recede. Sensing that the portcullis is shut against him, Patrick departs. Moreover, Matthew arises from his chair during an act of chivalry. Dr. Clarkson revises the diagnosis: Matthew’s spine was bruised. Ambulation (and presumably virility) restored, Matthew makes plans to wed Lavinia. Her death before the wedding is a tragedy, but has negligible impact on Matthew’s status, which Violet’s telling comment to Matthew, “There’s no getting out of it [marriage] for our kind of people,” cements as aristocratic (Fellowes, *Two* 406).

By the Christmas Special, the last episode of the second series, Matthew embodies innovation and tradition. References to his office and work no longer enliven the text, but he still practices law and his expertise is evident when Bates, Lord Grantham’s valet, is on trial for murder. Professional knowledge, no longer depicted as vulgar, may be the ideal partner for tradition and suggests that the future of the aristocracy lies in such a union. In the column of

tradition, Matthew handles a rifle passably well at a shooting party and Mary reminds a jealous Sir Richard that he cannot escape Matthew because the latter will be the head of her extended family one day. Because of his guilt over Lavinia's death (she knew on her deathbed that he still loved Mary), Matthew cannot see a future with Mary, but neither does he want Sir Richard to claim his fourth cousin's hand. Thrice he defends Mary's honor, the last of the three acts ending with a fistfight. Nasty Sir Richard exits the abbey for good. Matthew overcomes his guilt and proposes. This time Mary accepts him with alacrity.

The third series opens at the rehearsal for Matthew and Mary's wedding. All appears to be proceeding smoothly, including Matthew's integration into the Grantham clan as son-in-law, until a crisis looms: Robert loses most of his fortune in an investment. Next Matthew learns that he is the heir of Lavinia's recently deceased father. Matthew has not assuaged his guilt over Lavinia's death sufficiently in order to use Mr. Swire's bequest to save Downton. Mary cannot comprehend how Matthew puts his scruples before the good of his extended family; however, she goes through with the marriage. Matthew later accepts the money, which he offers to his father-in-law in the third episode. Robert accepts it on the condition that they own the estate jointly. Matthew quickly realizes how poor a manager his father-in-law has been and thus begins an arc in the narrative: how the future of Downton is centered on this tension between innovation and tradition.

The remainder of the series depicts Matthew forcibly as the future of Downton. He is betwixt and between his personal past and future, as well as a traditional and modern aristocracy. He fulfills traditional roles with ability and projects an increasingly noble image.⁴

Matthew continues his role as a protector of the family's honor (vis-à-vis the relationship between the married Michael Gregson and Edith), and appears at ease in aristocratic settings. His daytime wardrobe shifts toward a country gentleman's (Fellowes and Sturgis 227); and in Episode 8, he refers to his club in London, another aristocratic marker. Against this backdrop of tradition, he still works as a lawyer. His innovation places him at odds with Robert. He supports Edith's budding career in journalism. More significant, his shrewdness impels him to move the estate toward a firmer financial foundation. In the eighth episode, he devises a scheme to encourage some residents to sell their tenancies so that the Granthams can farm these lands directly. The pressure between Robert and Matthew explodes when the two men discuss the plan, along with Tom Branson (the estate's new agent), Cora, and Mary. Matthew loses patience and reminds Robert sharply of his past failures in investment, which stings Robert. The breach is repaired and Robert agrees to Matthew's vision, but with some reluctance.

When the Christmas Special of the third series opens one year later, Matthew's relationships with his in-laws are solid and his destiny as earl seems assured. On the Crawleys' visit to the Flintshires in Scotland, Matthew conducts himself as a future nobleman. He appears very much to be "one of [them]". The estate's outlook is positive: Robert acknowledges to Cora that Matthew's direction is Downton's hope. Mary is pregnant, which bodes well for the succession. Upon returning to Downton, Mary delivers a boy, and the new parents rejoice together. Death strikes when Matthew's roadster is overturned after his departure from the hospital. The rites of passage of Matthew Crawley come to an end. His vision for Downton will play out in an arena of conflict in the fourth series. As such, Matthew will continue to "perform" in the narrative (Albrecht 710, 713), but the accident fixes his liminality. His curtailed life is a

lesson in evolution, not ennoblement: his destiny as earl of Grantham evanesces on the country lane.

A Journey: Tom Branson

Commonalities exist between the evolution of both Matthew Crawley and Tom Branson, as do sharp differences. Both men become Lord Grantham's sons-in-law and tread a contested path. However, Branson's trek is more spectacular; he is far less "one of [them]" at the outset. Matthew is a Crawley; Branson, no relation. Matthew is English; Branson, Irish. Matthew is Anglican; Branson, Catholic. Whereas Matthew is no Tory, Branson is a socialist. And perhaps the greatest distinction of all: Matthew begins with a place at the family's dining room table; Branson, as chauffeur, hardly has rights to dine in the servants' hall (Fellowes, *One* 211; Fellowes, *Two* 154). Matthew's status shifts from the beginning of *Downton*; Branson's is stable for almost the first two series. And unlike Matthew Crawley, whose destiny is an earldom, Tom Branson has no clear terminus.

The audience meets Branson in the fourth episode of the first series as Carson, the butler, brings the new chauffeur to Robert in the library. Branson strikes him as a "bright spark," and the earl offers him the privilege of borrowing books. Robert soon observes the chauffeur's radicalism as he notes the latter's selections, "It's all Marx and Ruskin and John Stuart Mill," but he fails to catch the real menace: his driver's attraction to his youngest daughter, Lady Sybil. In the last scene of the episode, Branson stands unobserved outside the window of the drawing room, admiring Sybil as she models her new harem pants to her surprised family. The shot is meaningful. The chauffeur's gaze hints at an undercurrent of

(dangerous) sexuality, a topic that appeared in the portrayal of male servants in the contemporaneous literature on domestic service (Delap 193–94). The shot also depicts him as outside the family, but the viewer may begin to wonder how great a barrier class is between the two characters.

An unequal friendship between Sybil and Branson develops, but the attraction remains one-sided for several years. Branson encourages her political interests, and Robert nearly fires him after Sybil is injured at an electoral count to which Branson drove her. At the garden party at which Lord Grantham announces the war, Branson grasps Sybil's hand. Two years later, after he has driven her to nursing school in York, he reveals his feelings. He acknowledges the social distance between them: "I've told myself and told myself you're too far above me." Yet he knows war is changing society and asks her to "bet" on him (Fellowes, *Two* 65). She cannot accept his proposal, but dissuades him when he says that he will resign his post.

Shortly after Sybil returns to Downton to work as a nurse, she confesses to Branson that she cannot return to her life before the war. Throughout the second series their friendship deepens. When Sybil confesses to Mary that Branson is in love with her, Mary scoffs: "You'd marry the chauffeur and we'd all come to tea" (228). Because Mary keeps Sybil's secret, the couple continues the relationship. After the war, she makes the leap. They try to elope, but her sisters stop them. If Sybil is to marry the chauffeur, she must not do so like "a thief in the night" (414).

At the beginning of Episode 8, in one of the most dramatic scenes in *Downton*, Branson joins the family in the drawing room, where Sybil and he announce their engagement and plans

to move to Dublin. Branson is anomalous in a cheap suit and on edge in a room that he has rarely entered. The couple faces a fusillade. When Violet asks what Branson's mother thinks, he admits that she feels the couple is being foolish. Violet's riposte, "Well, at least we have something in common," is made all the more effective by her dismissive raking of him. Mary's contemptuous "[h]e isn't one of us" comes to mind and fits Branson like a glove. As Sybil beckons to Branson that they leave the room, the audience knows that his employment has ended. No longer the chauffeur, can Tom Branson make the transformation to son-in-law and a member of the earl's family?

Lord Grantham directs the first steps of the journey. An attempted bribe fails, and after realizing that he cannot stop the couple, he changes tack. He offers his daughter and her fiancé a muted blessing, with a small dowry, but subsequent action shows limits to his acceptance. The audience learns in the Christmas Special that only Mary and Edith attended the wedding. Cora receives a letter from Sybil announcing her pregnancy. Cora is happy; Robert, less so. In his words, they are "to have a Fenian grandchild." However, in a later scene the couple discusses the news. Cora "won't be kept" from her first grandchild, and she wants to visit Sybil in Dublin and invite Sybil and her husband to Downton. When Cora suggests that they end the evening "on a happy note," Robert shrugs and embraces his wife, an act of acquiescence.

Robert has backed away from his assent by the opening of the third series, the rehearsal for Mary and Matthew's wedding. The Bransons cannot afford the trip, and Robert squelches Mary's hint that he pay their passage. Robert wants his daughter's Society wedding to be unblemished. A radical Irishman is not on the menu. He will allow a visit when it can be

engineered “gently.” Violet is of a different mind. She anonymously sends the money for their fares, and Sybil and Tom arrive at Downton dressed in middle-class garb. Tom’s mother-in-law and sisters-in-law are polite, but Robert and Carson barely acknowledge him. The family enters the house for tea in the library. Mary’s gibe of Sybil marrying the chauffeur and everyone coming to tea has transpired. The bumpy passage of Tom Branson from servant to son-in-law unfurls in earnest.

At his first dinner with the family, Tom is as much out of his element as he was on the strained night in the drawing room. Sybil and he have not changed clothes, and in his cheap suit he reveals that he has no formal wear for the wedding. He makes clear his contempt for the monarchy, “a foreign power,” and his wish for an independent, unified Ireland. After dinner he visits the servants’ hall, but Carson makes him feel unwelcome. In Tom’s mind, he belongs nowhere. Hope appears. As Mary and Sybil talk privately, Mary vows to Sybil that “we’ll know him [Tom] and value him.” Yet obstacles remain. In bed with Sybil, he vetoes her suggestion that he buy white tie and tails and becomes testy when she asks him to talk less about Ireland. In the morning he goes to the village to take a room in the pub, where Matthew sees him. Matthew scolds him gently for the previous night, but convinces him to remain at the house. The two men depart together, marking the beginning of a fraternal bond. Tom has allies.

The second dinner at Downton is explosive. The Granthams host the family of Lord Merton, Mary’s godfather. Sybil has donned a gown from her pre-nuptial wardrobe, but Tom has no formal wear. Lord Merton’s son Larry spikes Tom’s drink. Tom’s stupefied rants make everyone uncomfortable. Just when some viewers think that Lord Grantham will toss out his

son-in-law, Sir Anthony Strallan exposes Larry. The three sisters come to Tom's defense. Mary turns coldly on "Mr. Grey," a childhood friend in her social orbit, and refers to Tom pointedly as her brother-in-law. Larry compounds his gaffe by showing no remorse and referring to Tom as "a grubby little chauffer chap." Lord Merton, Robert, and Matthew stand up in affront. Merton apologizes for his son, but the real surprise follows: Matthew asks Tom to be his best man in front of the startled company. The dowager countess has a project on her hands.

In the morning Tom arrives at Crawley House; Isobel and Violet wish to see him. The audience infers what is afoot: one cannot serve as best man at a Society wedding in a working-class suit. The two ladies are determined to fit him for a morning coat, with the help of Molesley. So far Tom has upheld Erasmus's adage *vestis virum facit* (the garment makes the man). He does not want to cultivate aristocratic symbolism. He attempts a last stand by stating his opposition to wearing the costume of the aristocracy, or "the uniform of oppression," but Violet and Isobel hold firm. Tom capitulates.

The third dinner with Tom at Downton Abbey and its aftermath show his further integration into the family. Matthew and Isobel are absent on the night before the nuptials. Tom is casually dressed, but sits at the position of the male guest of honor, to Cora's right. Robert refers to him as Tom for the first time, and Violet reveals that she sent the money for the Bransons' voyage. She points out amidst the shocked faces that he is part of the family. This standpoint is tested immediately. Mary's earlier fight with Matthew over Swire's will unsettled her and she leaves the table in tears. Robert says that he will visit Matthew after dinner. Tom counters his father-in-law. As best man, it is his duty. He reminds his in-laws that he knows

what marrying into the family entails and Matthew “is another kind of outsider.” Violet appraises her grandson-in-law sharply—she may regret her claim that he is part of the family, or she may see his potential for the first time. Robert and Tom look at each other uneasily and then away. However, Tom, not Robert, travels to Crawley House. Tom encourages Matthew to visit Mary and proceed with the wedding, while noting the absurdity of his making a case for saving an estate and dynasty. Anna, Mary’s maid, likewise encourages her to rethink her hesitation. The interventions succeed. In the morning, Tom descends the grand staircase resplendent in a morning suit. At the foot of the stairs, Robert tells Tom—whom he calls Tom in direct address for the first time—that he looks sharp. He also thanks him for the previous night’s work. The first flicker of warmth passes between Robert and Tom since the latter’s engagement. The audience does not see the departure of the Bransons for Ireland, but can assume that it was cordial. Tom has a foothold above stairs.

The Bransons return to Downton in the third episode for the wedding of Edith to Sir Anthony Strallan. Tom looks at ease in the library, where his father-in-law answers a personal question from him without dismay. Later, shown in a dinner jacket for the first time, Tom is seated with Robert, Anthony, and Matthew after dinner. Although Robert cuts off Tom when the latter responds to a political inquiry from Anthony, Robert tells Anthony privately that the family is getting used to Tom. Sybil and Tom are in few scenes in the episode, but these scenes show Tom in the family’s good graces.

Tom and Sybil return to the spotlight in the next episode, in which he takes a major step backward. Tom was present at a burning of an Anglo-Irish peer’s castle in Ireland and flees

without Sybil for Downton to evade the authorities. The Crawleys do not receive him warmly, although Robert sees the home secretary to keep Tom out of prison. The petition succeeds, but Tom is barred from returning to Ireland. After Sybil arrives in England, Tom tells her that he cannot stay at Downton for long. As the fifth episode opens, Sybil is on the verge of a difficult labor. Sybil's death after delivering a girl devastates the family. Cora assures her daughter's body that she will take care of Tom and the baby. Standing at a window and apart from his in-laws, the weeping widower holds his daughter in the final scene of the episode; the angle of the camera and *mise-en-scène* illustrate entrapment and foreboding.

Conflict erupts between Robert and his son-in-law over Tom's daughter in the next episode. Tom states firmly, "My daughter is Irish and she will be Catholic like her father." Robert wants to cloak his granddaughter in the mantle of the nobility. Catholicism is beyond the pale. Robert enlists the vicar to sway Tom. At a tense dinner, Tom insists that his daughter, Sybil, later referred to as Sybbie, "will be baptized into my tribe." The other Crawleys unite behind Tom and Robert's campaign fails. Matthew and Tom later discuss Tom's future while they walk on the estate. Tom is considering moving to Liverpool to work with his brother. In the longer version of the scene, shown in the United States on Public Broadcasting Service (PBS),⁵ he remarks that Lord Grantham still sees him as the chauffeur. A subsequent scene confirms Tom's hunch: as Matthew discusses the estate with Robert in front of Tom, the earl does not want to discuss business before Tom any more than in front of the servants or villagers.

As Robert and Matthew spar over the estate, the narrative lays the groundwork in the seventh episode for an opportunity for Tom. The agent of the estate, Jarvis, strongly opposes

Matthew's vision. Meanwhile, Tom is shown increasingly at home at Downton. Natty in black tie and comfortable enough to accept a drink on a tray from a footman, he discusses the estate with Mary and Matthew, which Robert and Violet overhear. The earl needles Tom, but Violet asks him about his knowledge of farming. Kieran, Tom's brother, arrives from Liverpool for the christening, and the two men could hardly be presented more differently. Kieran insults Mary and wants to eat downstairs. Tom tells his brother that his "mother-in-law" invited him and Tom won't let him "snub" her. Even Carson admits to Mrs. Hughes that he admires "Mr. Branson's respect for her ladyship's invitation." Kieran is sorely out of place at dinner and afterward in the drawing room. His manners are comically atrocious. Dress and deportment align Tom with his in-laws, and the gap between Matthew and Tom as sons-in-law is becoming narrower. Late in the evening, Robert, Cora, and Violet discuss the news of the day: Jarvis's resignation. Violet proposes a radical, but elegantly simple solution: offer the position to "Branson." She wants him to stay at Downton. The elders must think of Sybbie—life above a garage in Liverpool is unacceptable. Robert caves. The final scene of the episode, after the christening, depicts Kieran as the outsider and Tom as an insider. Robert, Matthew, and Tom discuss Robert's offer of the job. Kieran looks unlike the Crawleys. The photographer's shot of the party in the scene freezes the composition of the family. Kieran, the phantom outsider, will step out of the space and return to Liverpool. Tom will remain with Sybbie at Downton.

Tom's relationship with his in-laws is a major theme of the eighth episode. Now employee and in-law, he is unsure of daily life in the big house and plans to occupy Jarvis's former residence. Robert, who prizes the annual cricket match in which the men of the household compete against men of the village, is disappointed that Tom will not play. Tom

never explains his objection to the game, but one can infer that the symbolism of the aristocratic English sport disturbs him. Cora supports him, and when Robert and Carson discuss Tom's reluctance in front of her, she corrects her husband's use of "Branson" and shows her displeasure at Carson's criticism of her son-in-law. Later in the episode, Matthew, Tom, Cora, and Mary challenge Robert on his resistance to Matthew's proposal to buy out some of their tenants and farm the land directly. Matthew's frustration boils over and he insults Robert. When Tom is alone with Robert he broaches the subject with his tetchy father-in-law. He uses a dynastic argument: those who are born into the family and those who marry into it must use their gifts for the greater good, and each of the three men has a contribution to make to the estate. He situates himself within Lord Grantham's dynasty, a stance that Robert earlier would have found presumptuous. Instead, Robert praises his eloquence. Robert makes his deliberation conditional: Tom must play cricket. Tom assents and practices the sport with Matthew. Tom makes a revealing comment to Matthew: "You won't make a gentleman of me, you know. You can teach me to fish, to ride, to shoot, but I'll still be an Irish mick in my heart." During the match, two symbolic moments occur that pertain to Tom's status. First, he sees a group of children playing together and gazes over to where Mary cradles Sybbie with Matthew in attendance. Tom stoops down under the family's pavilion, which evokes a cloth of estate, and sits with Cora. After confirming that she wants him to live with the family, he agrees to stay while his daughter is little. Second, after Robert tells Matthew that he will support his plans and gives credit to Tom for convincing him, the men resume the game. Tom catches out Dr. Clarkson. The house team is ecstatic and even Carson chuckles. In the final shot, Tom runs toward Robert and Matthew. The earl shakes his victorious son-in-law's hand and Matthew

pulls them into a group hug. Through a successful dynastic argument and a triumph in an aristocratic ritual, Tom has become a member of the family.

Or has he? The Christmas Special of the third series moves the calendar forward one year, to the latter part of 1921. Subsequent events present a contradictory image of Tom. The Granthams visit the Flintshires in Scotland. Tom was not invited and remains behind with his daughter. As the sole member of the family in residence he takes his meals at the house at the head of the table in the dining room, as would Robert, and is de facto head of household. However, upon returning from dinner at Crawley House, he returns through the servants' entrance so that no one need wait for him at the front door. He acknowledges his anomalous status and hints at his loneliness to a new maid, Edna. Although her objective is unclear, she exploits his vulnerability. She asks him to have dinner with the servants one evening and remains seated when he enters the servants' hall. At Edna's urging, he drives the servants to a fair, where he joins the male staff in a tug-of-war. Edna grabs his arm at the fair and that night enters his room while he is shirtless, ostensibly to give him a message. Before departing she kisses him. Tom has entered dangerous territory. Congress with Edna could have consequences for him, unlike Robert's dalliance with Jane in the second series. Mrs. Hughes observes the dynamic between the two and fires the maid. At Tom's request, she gives Edna a reference, which will haunt the household. Mrs. Hughes scolds Tom for not discouraging Edna, and tells him that he should be unashamed of his elevation in status. At the closing of the episode the family reflects on the news of Mary's birth of a son. The joy will be short-lived: Matthew's death will cast a pall and remove Tom's staunchest ally.

Tom's contradictory image continues in the fourth series, and his isolation—at least his sense of isolation—remains a prominent theme. His fortunes also fluctuate. In his evening wear he could pass for an aristocrat; in his day clothing he appears middle class (Rowley 172). There is no evidence of disharmony with the family; rather, he seems to be an integral member. Even Robert shows acceptance of his son-in-law and apologizes to him when he makes an insensitive comment about the pain of losing a great love. However, complications arise. Robert wishes to sell land to pay the duties arising from Matthew's death, which concerns Tom; Lord Grantham also opposes Tom's attempts to pull Mary out of mourning and involve her in the management of the estate. Lacking the authority of Matthew, Tom visits Carson and enlists the help of the senior servant. Before Carson succeeds in convincing Mary to play a role in the estate, Tom experiences an ominous setback: Edna rejoins the household as Cora's maid. Unbeknownst to him, his status casts a shadow over his daughter's life as well. The nanny favors Mary's son, George. At bedtime she scolds Sybbie, whom she calls "the chauffeur's daughter" and "wicked little crossbreed." Cora witnesses Nanny West's behavior and fires her immediately, but the nanny's cheek illustrates the problematic position of the two Bransons.

Mary's awakening provides Tom with an ally as agent and reinforces his status. No longer wearing black, she joins the tenants' luncheon at the end of the first episode, which surprises her father but pleases her brother-in-law. She asks the tenants intelligent questions in a manner that evokes Scarlett O'Hara taking the reins at Tara. In the following episode the family discovers that Matthew left a letter for Mary stating his intentions that she inherit his portion of the estate. Robert's lawyer determines that the letter has the force of a will. Violet enlists Tom to serve as Mary's tutor. He drives her around the estate and lays out the major

decision that the family faces, as well as its corollary: how to pay the death duties and to what extent should land be sold to pay them. Mary agrees with Tom, and the earl is no longer the undisputed master. Robert, Mary, and Tom, a new trinity, will guide Downton.

A festive house party in Episode 3 is Tom's social Waterloo and threatens worse. Surrounded by visiting aristocrats, he feels alien. For the first time he is shown in white tie, but he tells Edna that his "clothes deceive no one." He adds, "I am a fish out of water, and I've never felt it more than today." His conversations with the visitors are awkward, as is his dancing with the dowager duchess of Yeovil. While Robert pours himself a drink in the library, he sees that his son-in-law has taken refuge in the room. Tom tells Robert that the house party has shown him that he does not belong at Downton. He feels like a poseur. However, Tom receives the earl's unconditional acceptance, a first. Robert disagrees, "You *are* one of us. Now." This support makes Tom smile, but fails to counter his feeling of isolation. Edna makes her move and plies Tom with liquor. After bedtime, she goes to his room. The scene ends, but the subsequent episode confirms that she seduced him. Edna approaches him twice in Episode 4 to ask if he will marry her if she has conceived. Tom realizes his dire predicament.

Mary and Tom travel to London to arrange for long-term payment of the death duties on the estate during his personal crisis. The trip reinforces Tom's curious anomalousness. Mary and Tom, without Robert, meet with the officials. Rose travels to London as well, and along with Robert's sister, Lady Rosamund Painswick, Lord Gillingham, and Sir John Bullock, they visit a nightclub. Tom is moving in the upper echelons of society in the capital, both in business and leisure. Rosamund dances with Tom and makes clear that she sees him as part of the family.

When Rose dances with the bandleader, which displeases the ladies, Tom collects her, much in the manner of Matthew in the preceding Christmas Special. Sensing that Tom is disturbed, Mary invites Tom to unburden himself, but he will not discuss his problem with her. Back at Downton he visits Mrs. Hughes, who exposes Edna and convinces her to resign. In the last scene of the episode Tom and Mary drive away from Downton on business and he tells her that the shadows have receded.

Edna's departure eliminates a threat, but the mishap strengthens Tom's doubts about his life. Ribbing from Robert about socialism makes Tom assess his convictions, and his qualms animate the next two episodes. In Episode 5 Tom tells his in-laws that the house party made him feel like an "intruder." He is "a man without a home," and "stateless." He is also concerned that Sybbie could suffer as the "daughter of an uppity chauffeur." Although life with the Crawleys changed him such that he could not return to Ireland, he is considering a move to America. Robert advises him against making a rash decision. In an extended scene on PBS, Robert and Cora discuss Tom's revelation privately and the earl admits that he wants Tom to stay. He is thinking primarily of his granddaughter, but the viewer can conclude that Robert now values his son-in-law's company and work. At a dinner party at Downton in honor of Robert's birthday, Isobel discusses Tom's plans with him. He speaks of his anomalous status and how he cannot remain indefinitely at Downton, even though he loves his in-laws. He alludes to remarriage: the chances of winning the hand of another aristocrat's daughter are miniscule, and his in-laws would not be "comfy" if he brought an "Irish working girl" to live at the abbey. However, as the two dance to a jazz band, Tom remarks on the oddity of jazz at Downton. Isobel points out that Downton itself evolves and may prove conducive to his aspirations.

Tom appears no closer in the next two episodes to leaving, and his character recedes slightly. Several clues suggest that Downton will remain his home. Robert leaves for the United States to assist Cora's brother, Harold. Tom is the last person to whom Robert says farewell. After a warm handshake, Robert asks Tom to "look after all my women folk, including Isis. Especially Isis." As Robert is driven away, Robert's dog is at Tom's side. It is Violet, not Tom, who presides over a dinner in Episode 8 while Robert is in America, but at dinner Tom is sure enough of his standing to reproach Mary in defense of Edith. At the urging of Isobel, he attends a speech in Ripon by a member of Parliament. There he meets Sarah Bunting, a local teacher. As they meet over the two episodes he acquaints her with his unusual story and defends his in-laws, toward whom the outspoken woman shows some prejudice. When Robert returns to a warm reunion of the family at the end of Episode 8, Tom is in the tableau.

As in the Christmas Special of the third series, the special of the fourth moves the narrative forward one year and takes the family away from Yorkshire (this time to London for Rose's debut at court). At the beginning of the episode most of the Crawleys are in residence at Grantham House in London; Edith and Tom are at Downton. After Edith travels to London, Tom appears as the lone outsider, as in the previous special. A threat looms as well, but not in the form of a seductive maid. The under-butler, Thomas Barrow, sees Tom and Sarah Bunting on the second floor, in the vicinity of the bedrooms, and tries to use this knowledge. Thereafter, in a rich *mise-en-scène*, Tom sits in splendor before Van Dyck's magnificent painting of Charles I, with Isis at his feet. He could pass for the lord of the manor at breakfast, but Barrow's menace and Tom's insecurity evince the contradictions of his position. However, the parallel with the previous special only extends to a point: Tom leaves for London to join his in-laws and defends

his status before the car leaves the driveway. As he, Barrow, and the kitchen maid, Ivy, approach the car, Barrow hints that he should join Tom in the back seat. Lord Grantham's son-in-law puts his former colleague in his place. Barrow opens the door for Tom and sits in the front seat. Tom shows some discomfort in the capital, but also a degree of acculturation lacking at the house party in the third episode. The canine symbolism continues: in London, Isis sits at the feet of Tom and Robert, ostensibly both her masters. Tom plays poker with Robert and several other gentlemen that evening. When Tom attends Rose's ball at Grantham House, which the prince of Wales also attends, Violet and Tom share an amusing, yet meaningful exchange. She tells him, "[T]hese are your people now. You must remember that. This is your family." He responds, "This may be my family, but these are not quite my people." She sees a challenge in his comment, but agrees to dance with him, adding with a chortle, "I know I can trust you to steer." Nor is the former chauffeur finished for the evening. He admits to Edith that he "enjoyed it [the ball] fine," but continues, "[W]e need to stand up to them, you and I. We may love them, but if we don't fight our corner they'll roll us out flat." With her brother-in-law's words fresh in her mind, Edith pursues bringing her illegitimate child to Yorkshire. Tom's final scene in the fourth series illustrates the latest stage of a dramatic odyssey. Unlike the actor who played Matthew, Dan Stevens, the actor who plays Tom, Allen Leech, has remained with the show, whose fifth series is in production.

Liminality, Turner, and *Downton*

The passages of Matthew and Tom show a tremendous degree of betwixt and between, but are they liminal? These journeys both align with, and diverge from, Turner's definitions of

liminality. Matthew's journey is more clearly defined than Tom's, as previously noted, with recognizable transitions among the phases. Matthew's passage begins with his summons to Downton to train for the life of an aristocrat, at which point he is (largely) separated from his bourgeois roots. A long period of liminality follows, which presumably would have ended—had he lived—when he took his seat in the House of Lords after Robert's death. At this stage he no longer would be a commoner. If one views Matthew's journey more loosely as acculturation to the nobility (or to the Grantham family), he is incorporated, or aggregated, by the time of his marriage to Mary. Tom's route is harder to mark. The point of separation could lie in his leaving service at Downton, or its corollary, marrying Lady Sybil. It is also challenging to pinpoint when his liminal phase ends. Tom has no recognizable destination; acculturation to his in-laws' family is the best signpost. By all appearances the Crawleys, even the more conservative and senior Robert and Violet, have accepted him by the end of the fourth series. Yet Tom remains distinct, most noticeably in wardrobe and behavior. He never addresses Carson without a "Mr." and in his tête-à-tête with Mrs. Hughes regarding Edna he starts to rise when she stands. He also remains conflicted about his new status, of which his riposte to Violet, "[T]hese are not quite my people," is prime evidence. This self-doubt raises an intriguing point. To what extent is a subject's definition of one's own status a determinant of that status? Do only external parties (e.g., "tribal elders" in Turner) determine the subject's status? In other words, can Tom be classified as aggregated if he feels liminal?

To answer that question in part, I will argue that Tom's case suggests that he inhabits two of Turner's categories along his path. If one defines his incorporation as acceptance by his in-laws, he is liminal throughout most of the third series, "no longer classified and not yet

classified" (Turner, *Forest* 96). The cricket game, or at least his victory, marks the end of his liminal phase, in spite of his continued unease with his aristocratic trappings. This discomfort is sufficiently acute so that he refers to himself as "alien," but he is never an "outsider" as defined by Turner because he exists within society (Turner, *Dramas* 233). His relationship, however, to Society (i.e., the aristocracy) is fraught. Turner's category of marginality fits Tom. Marginals "are simultaneously members (by ascription, optation, self-definition, or achievement) two or more groups whose social definitions and cultural norms are distinct from, and often even opposed to one another" Tom also is a "migrant foreigner" and a "parvenu," which Turner associates with marginals. He also aligns with subsequent elements of Turner's definition. He is "highly . . . self-conscious" and the ranks of marginals include a disproportionately "high number of writers." (He was a journalist in Ireland while married to Sybil.) The conclusion of the definition also fits: "[m]arginals like liminars are also betwixt and between, but unlike ritual liminars they have no cultural assurance of a final stable resolution of their ambiguity" (Turner, *Dramas* 233). In summary, Tom's marriage is the beginning of his liminal phase, but after his return to Downton he inhabits both a liminal and marginal period, until the former ends.

Other attributes of Turner's depiction of liminality enliven the narrative pertaining to the sons-in-law in *Downton*. Although they are never entirely "divested of their previous habits of thought, feeling, and action," they reflect deeply on society and their odyssey (Turner, *Forest* 105). Toms' angst-ridden reflection is a major theme of the fourth series. The interstructural nature of both men is in full evidence, which vexes downstairs and upstairs alike: Matthew and Tom defy classification in their liminal phases. Carson initially refers to Matthew and Isobel as "the new family" as if they are not Crawleys (82). Violet finds Matthew vexing upon his arrival.

To her, this upstart upends the *scala naturae*. Tom's liminality is more disquieting, if not polluting (Turner, *Forest* 97). The presence of a former servant upstairs is a threat, an inversion of the natural order. Jessica Fellowes and Matthew Sturgis express the point well. Sybil's marriage to Tom turns Robert's world upside down (21) and offends Carson: he "is ruffled when things veer off course, whether it's maids in the dining room . . . or the chauffeur sleeping above stairs as the husband of the Earl's youngest daughter" (41).

Rites of passage, as well as ceremonies, illuminate the men's journeys, as discussed above. Many of the rites are ceremonies, and not rituals, according to Turner's definition, because they fail to confer status (95). Rather, they mark it. Twentieth-century England is also a "complex, industrial societ[y]," not a tribal one (Turner, *Rice* 72).⁶ The strict binary distinctions within Turner of ritual/ceremony, work/play, and liminal/liminoid are not straightforward, however, when applied to *Downton*. Some of the rites in *Downton* confer status and some are not optional. Matthew cannot escape his trajectory as earl. As Isobel reminds him, "You *will* be an earl" (Fellowes, *One*, 74). Assuming Robert had not sired a son and Matthew had outlived Robert, Matthew would have been raised to the peerage with an accompanying rite. Even the cricket match, at first glance a clear-cut example of leisure, aligns with Turner's definition of ritual. Tom must play the game or Robert will not give Matthew's reforms a hearing. The spectacular ending of the game also indicates ritual: the group hug after Tom's victory implies that successful participation transformed him and made him a Crawley.

The liminal experiences of Matthew and Tom diverge from Turner in several key areas, in part because they inhabit a complex society at the beginning of a period of rapid change.

Matthew and Tom are not characterized by nothingness,⁷ nor are they secluded or quarantined (Turner, *Forest* 98–99). They show a comradeship—Tom refers to Matthew as “another kind of outsider” in the first episode of the third series—but the narrative lacks substantial evidence of *communitas* à la Turner. The sons-in-law remain within the structures of society during their liminal periods, and they are never fully “divested of their previous habits of thought, feeling, and action” (Turner 105). Rather, they evolve, as does their milieu at both the micro and macro levels. The monumental changes to which the narrative of *Downton* attests undercut some aspects of Turner’s paradigm: the status system of the British aristocracy—seemingly timeless for centuries—begins to shift and no longer offers an absolute point of reference within which to situate an objective liminal period. As La Shure writes, liminality “is not outside the social structure or on its edges, it is in the cracks within the social structure itself,” fitting words for a social structure with obvious fissures.

The poststructuralist insights of Sandor Klapcsik are fruitful for understanding *Downton Abbey* and its attendant liminality, particularly in the passage of Tom Branson. Although indebted to Turner, Klapcsik challenges the linear and positivist approach of the ethnographer. He writes, “Poststructuralist thinking also indicates that instead of duality, we should discover the multiplicity of spaces and timelines” (14). His “distinct characteristics” of liminality, discussed in the second section of this paper, are congruous with a reading of *Downton*. In particular, Tom exhibits a “constant oscillation, crossing back and forth between social and cultural positions.” His journey is not strictly linear, and Matthew and other characters also display “crossing back and forth.” And although challenging to comprehend, Klapcsik’s description of liminality as “the space of continuous transference . . . forming an infinite process

towards an unreachable end” and “created by transgressions, or traversals, across evanescent, porous, indefinite, ambiguous, evasive borderlines” (14) expresses a theoretical richness that does justice to the text of *Downton*, an environment rife with evasive borderlines.⁸

An analysis of liminality (or of any theory) is an exercise in classification, a truism worthy of exploration here. Cataloging and classification are core practices of the author’s field, librarianship. Even in this increasingly digital age, one in which an electronic work does not occupy a (single) slot or position on the shelf, careful and consistent description of material enables its retrieval. Classification has a much larger role both in and beyond libraries: it creates associations, among objects and ideas, through which we make meaning of our world. Classification is not a neutral activity; as a social construct it harbors biases and—more important to an understanding of liminality—creates boundaries that can exclude and marginalize (Olson 234). To address this problem, Hope Olson advocates classificatory schemes with more porous boundaries—here she shares ground with Klapcsik’s definition of liminality—and the creation of “paradoxical spaces” in these schemes to reveal marginalized knowledge (e.g., unpaid labor). She writes, “With care, paradoxical spaces will appear throughout classifications, thereby keeping them from stagnating and keeping them vital and exciting” (252). Scholars walk a fine line in their use of liminality. On the one hand, it is a useful category of analysis, and Turner’s contributions need not be viewed as a fixed canon. If I may borrow from Olson, pushing the boundaries of liminality can open up interpretations in a variety of disciplines and help make scholarship “vital and exciting.” On the other hand, pushing the boundaries too far, being too free with liminality (e.g., making it synonymous with ambiguity) risks totalizing the concept. Olson does not advocate the abolishment of classification, but

rather a more critical practice that questions boundaries and excavates meanings. Liminality may be particularly challenging, “evanescent, like a wisp of smoke” (La Shure). Yet scholars should wrestle with this rich category through continued scholarly conversation and debate.

If one accepts a broader definition of liminality, the concept suffuses *Downton* as a whole. Other characters undergo startling transformations, many of which run parallel to the experiences of Matthew and Tom. Mary, who utters the cutting “[h]e isn’t one of us,” changes from the spoiled eldest daughter of an earl who assumes her future is assured to a kinder, shrewder woman who understands that she must do her part to keep the estate profitable. Ritual plays a role in this transformation, although the phases do not consistently follow a tight definition of liminality. Through marriage to Matthew she becomes “one flesh” with a middle-class man. She also travels to Ireland to attend the wedding of her sister, who becomes “one flesh” with the family’s former chauffeur. Friendship between Mary and Tom takes root, and their relationship strengthens in the fourth series as the two act together on behalf of the estate. The younger ladies of the house, Sybil and Rose, come out in London, which makes them adults and eligible for courting and marriage. *Downton Abbey* also blurs fiction and fact in the narrative, which pulls the viewer into an intriguing *mélange*. The castle was a convalescent hospital during the Great War (Carnarvon 143). Historical characters, and not just major ones like David Lloyd George, frequent the text. Some garments and props are originals (Fellowes, *World* 141, 287). Most of the upstairs scenes are filmed at Highclere Castle, the home of a real earl and countess, Lord and Lady Carnarvon, and seat of a working estate. Many of the paintings and furnishings from the broadcast belong to the Carnarvons, and Lord Carnarvon’s ancestors gaze down from the canvases on Robert as if he were their descendant (274). And if

one looks at images of Highclere, the bunting atop the castle is identical to the bunting that the villagers wave on Matthew and Mary's wedding day.

The success of *Downton Abbey* could easily be the primary subject of multiple scholarly inquiries, and this paper will touch on it. The popularity of the show is not waning in the United States: initial Nielsen data indicated that the premiere of the fourth series broke the record for earlier ones (Stelter). Numerous arguments have been advanced to account for this American popularity, many revolving around nostalgia and preoccupation with class and status.⁹

Individual viewers watch the show for a variety of reasons, and these factors should not be discounted. I will advance two additional suggestions, both relating to liminality. The first I have not seen and the second I have, although in a different guise. First, the setting in *Downton* of the United Kingdom shows striking parallels to the United States of the 2010s, in both specific and more general aspects. Each Anglophone nation state is exiting a period as the sole superpower and navigating a more complex global community with widely dispersed power—and rising hegemonies with diverging interests and values. In short, each nation is at a *limen*. Viewers in the 2010s can also grasp readily how the modern appurtenances that increasingly define the world of the Crawleys and make it more complex—automobiles, telephones, mixers, refrigerators, and phonographs—have their counterparts in our own world: high-speed railways, smart phones, tablet computers, and streaming and social media. In a paraphrasing of Violet, each era has its “modern brainwaves.” These technological symbols point toward a second suggestion for the success, even relevance, of the show: change and the portrayal of how one meets it. *Downton* is a lesson in change, most appropriate in an era in which change has become more rapid and constant. Some of the changes in the text are impersonal (e.g.,

technological ones). Others are deeply personal and painful (e.g., the deaths of Sybil and Matthew). Most are unsettling and cannot be dodged. Matthew tells the more conservative Robert, “If you don’t change, you die” (Fellowes, *One* 230). It is easy to identify with Robert when he says, “Sometimes I feel like a creature in the wilds whose natural habitat is being destroyed” (Series 3, Episode 2). And yet, even Robert, who fears change and rues the disappearance of the old order, recognizes that “it’s a brave new world we’re headed for, no doubt about that. We must try to meet it with as much grace as we can muster” (Fellowes, *Two* 133). Ultimately *Downton* is a narrative of adaptation. When Violet and Robert watch Sybil depart the cemetery with Tom Branson within days of their shocking engagement, the sage dowager remarks, “The aristocracy has not survived by its intransigence” (482). Nor has any other person or group, fitting words in an era of accelerating change.

The acceleration of change in contemporary society is itself pertinent to the concept of liminality and the final, but tentative point this paper will address before the conclusion. Can liminality be relevant when technological and other changes imply that one inhabits an infinite phase, or multiple phases, of transition? Turner’s paradigm assumes three recognizable stages—but not a static society. As quoted earlier, Turner states, “*Rites de passage* are found in all societies but tend to reach their maximal expression in small-scale, relatively stable and cyclical societies, where change is bound up with biological and meteorological rhythms and recurrences rather than with technological innovations” (Turner, *Forest* 93). The key is “maximal.” We may live in an environment of ongoing, overlapping changes, but we often undergo passages with a resolution—we are incorporated or aggregated—even if that resolution is impermanent. A flexible, but not overly broad definition of liminality allows us to

understand the attributes and experiences of beings that are betwixt and between, in both simpler and complex societies, and in fictional and nonfictional worlds.

Downton Abbey can serve as an exercise in defining liminality and testing the boundaries of the various phases marked by rites of passage. Turner's scholarship remains relevant, and is perhaps more so in an era of accelerating change. Although work on liminality in the last several decades shows a tendency to extend the concept well beyond Turner, a careful application of liminality can help us understand the properties of individuals who undergo major transformations in this complex society, as well as the rituals that attend the transformations, germane points in an era in which self-definition and inclusion are highly valued. Liminality is a useful lens through which to view *Downton* and the striking odysseys of Lord Grantham's sons-in-law, brought to life by the actors Dan Stevens and Allen Leech. Matthew Crawley and Tom Branson, indeed the Crawleys as a whole, may be compelling in part because the closer we look at them and look beyond their aristocratic milieu, we see ourselves.

Notes

1. A cited reference search in the database Web of Science retrieves more than several thousand citations to articles in periodicals that cite the key works in which Turner discusses liminality. If the publisher of Web of Science handled the notes and bibliographies of books when compiling the records for the database, the figure would be significantly higher.
2. The database WorldCat, the world's largest union catalog, includes more than five hundred bibliographic records under the subject keyword liminality. Many of these texts were published in the last decade. The online MLA International Bibliography includes more than five hundred records under the subject term liminality.
3. This paper will follow the numeration of the episodes in the UK edition.
4. For an analysis of Matthew as a more conflicted character, see Fellowes and Sturgis 214–19.
5. The differences among the various editions are puzzling. The televised episodes (PBS) in the United States are usually longer than the episodes on DVD, which are equivalent to the televised UK episodes. Some scenes from the PBS version are lacking altogether in the UK edition; some are merely shorter. The UK edition also contains material lacking on PBS. For example, PBS excludes Tom Branson's interaction with the two women who hand out white feathers, in which he said, "I'm in a uniform" (Series 2, Episode 1). And apparently the German version includes material absent from both the American (PBS) and UK editions, including a scene of Sybil and Tom in Ireland (Series 3, Episode 1). The producer Rebecca Eaton mentions the differences between the televised PBS and UK editions in her book on *Masterpiece* without explaining them in detail. See Eaton 272.
6. A close analysis of Turner's distinction between liminal and liminoid and the implications for complex, contemporary society is beyond the scope of this paper. For a thoughtful analysis, see Couldry 34–35.
7. One could argue that Tom's escaping from Ireland with only one set of clothes is parallel to this state, but that would be stretching Turner too far and the character's near-nothingness lasts only briefly within his liminal period.
8. The italics in Klapcsik were not retained.
9. One could compile an exhaustive bibliography of examples. For representative works, see Miller and Witchel.

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