

The Once and Future King: Mike Bartlett's Future History in *King Charles III*

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Few things are as important to the identity of the British people as their country's contribution to Western literature and their particular form of constitutional monarchy. Playwright Mike Bartlett pays tribute to both of these themes in his "future-history" play, *King Charles III*: to Shakespeare, whom Ben Jonson called "Our Star of Poets" and undoubtedly still reigns as the greatest writer in the English language, and to the Royal Family. In fact, Mike Bartlett has said,

The idea for *King Charles III* arrived in my imagination with the form and content very clear, and inextricably linked. It would be a play about the moment Charles takes the throne, and how his conscience would lead him to refuse to sign a bill into law. An epic royal family drama, dealing with power and national constitution, was the content, and therefore the form had surely to be Shakespearean. ("Mike Bartlett: How I Wrote King Charles III")

Bartlett adopts the form of the five-act Shakespearean history play, using blank verse for the scenes involving the Royals—unrhymed iambic pentameter with rhyming couplets at the end of each scene—and plain prose for the scenes involving the commoners. Like Shakespeare, Bartlett also includes a subplot that provides counterpoint to the main action. The story of Prince Harry and Jess, the anti-monarchy young art student whom Harry falls for, brings Harry to the point of wanting to give up his identity as a member of the Royal Family at the same time as the Royal Family itself faces the possibility that the monarchy will not survive if the country is brought to the brink of civil war. Bartlett also incorporates the appearance of ghosts with enigmatic messages and metaphors familiar to other Shakespearean history plays, such as the identification of the King with the land itself, seen in Charles's speech to the members of the House of Commons when he is about to dissolve Parliament:

CHARLES: Unlike you all, I'm born and raised to rule.
I do not choose, but like an Albion oak
I'm sown in British soil, and grown not for
Myself but reared with single purpose meant.
Whilst you have small constituency support
Which gusts and falls, as does the wind
My cells and organs constitute this land
Devoted to entire population
Of now, of then, and all those still to come. (83)

One of Charles's last speeches also resonates back to the tone and themes of Shakespeare's *Richard II*, the story of another English king who loses his throne and ponders what the crown really signifies for a King. In Act 3, scene 2, Richard II says,

RICHARD: . . . for within the hollow crown

That rounds the mortal temples of a king
Keeps Death his court and there the antic sits,
Scoffing his state and grinning at his pomp,
Allowing him a breath, a little scene,
To monarchize, be fear'd and kill with looks,
Infusing him with self and vain conceit,
As if this flesh which walls about our life,
Were brass impregnable, and humour'd thus
Comes at the last and with a little pin
Bores through his castle wall, and farewell king!

In the very last scene of Bartlett's play, Charles appears to have similar moment of reflection on the emptiness of the crown—an object, title, and role he had longed for most of his life. The stage directions read,

*CHARLES reaches for the crown. The ARCHBISHOP is unsure.
Glances at William. Then gives the crown to CHARLES.*

A moment

CHARLES: It is much heavier that I thought.

He looks at William.

A moment

And from the side, bejeweled, it looks so rich

But turn it thus, and this is what you see

Nothing. (127-8)

Bartlett points out that, "Characters in [Shakespearean] form are allowed to use extended imagery to explore psychology and for a writer this is seductive" ("Mike Bartlett: How I Wrote King Charles III"). In fact, Bartlett reports that he actually felt that he had to reign in his penchant for filling his character's speeches with simile, metaphor and heightened language because he didn't want to "stray too far from the language we would believe them to speak day to day" ("Mike Bartlett: How I Wrote King Charles III"). Bartlett is a consummate dramatist and knows that his first priority must be to "make sure the plot significantly moved forward in every scene" ("Mike Bartlett: How I Wrote King Charles III"). Since the audience is focused on the parallel problems of familial relationships versus the limits of the King's constitutional authority, the heightened language could have the tendency to slow down and confuse the development of the action of the play.

Prince Charles throughout most of his life has been viewed with ambivalence and scepticism by many in British and American societies. This is due in large part to his perceived ill treatment of his first wife Diana, whose life ended so tragically in an auto accident after their divorce. The play takes all of this history for granted and develops a central irony by portraying Charles, whose life has been mercilessly sensationalized by the media, taking on the role of defender of the freedom of the press. In an early script of the play, Bartlett has Charles explain his true feelings about the power of the press to destroy lives:

Charles:

It cannot be a right or civilised
 Country, in which, in any private place
 A toilet, bedroom, might be there concealed
 A tiny camera, then these photos 'splayed
 As front page news, the consequences thrown
 Around the world and ever-lasting, so
 Without a jury, judge, or evidence
 A punishment is meted out, a life
 Is ruined, reputation murdered.
 And as we know the dead once dead are gone
 Forever, all that's left is writing on the
 Tomb, read by generations still to come
 The only remnant of what press destroyed –
 Electric letters scrawled forever on
 The graveyard of the cursed internet.

(“Mike Bartlett: How I Wrote King Charles III”)

Charles sees beyond his own bad experience with the scandal-hungry press to what for him is a more important question of principle. He says to Prime Minister Tristan Evans:

CHARLES: You do not think a principle is here
 At stake, that something vital to our sense
 Of freedom, both as individuals
 And country whole, is being risked? . . .
 The countless times we have through media scrum
 Exposed corruption, both in public life
 And private, matters that constabulary,
 Or government, cannot or won't attend.
 And who polices the police? Who holds
 Those Institutions to account that claim
 To be our guardians and serve us well?
 Perhaps to have the cure we must accept
 A vaccination of disease itself.
 Or better still, the press may be just like
 The antibodies present in our systems
 Evolved to seek and then, we hope, destroy
 The viruses that enter us from time to time. (27-8)

What Charles claims as king is the right to not sign a bill sent from Parliament for his ceremonial review when he wants the bill to be reviewed and revised before it passes into law. Charles demands this as his right because he feels an obligation as King to preserve what is uniquely British, especially the freedoms that serve as checks and balances on the country's political and social establishment. He says,

CHARLES: . . . not just am I defender of
 The faith but in addition I protect
 This country's unique force and way of life.
 We are not strong for manufacturing [,]
 Politically our sway and influence
 Are in decline, and thankfully most of

Our dubious Empire has bit the dust.
But still we demonstrate and can export
The way a just society should work:
Judiciary, democracy and more—
A low corruption rate. All those who hold
The strings held to account themselves in turn. (29)

Although Charles makes a valid point, the elected politicians in Parliament object not to the principle Charles is citing. They find as unacceptable the mere fact that the King would claim to have constitutional authority to refuse to endorse a law passed by the people's elected representatives. The Opposition Leader Mr. Stevens sums up the attitude of his colleagues as follows:

MR STEVENS: . . . We cannot have
The King approving laws depending on
His own opinion, or the way he feels.
So what do you intend to do, so that
We may, without distress, or publically
Embarrassing our newly minted King
Explain to him the simple duty that
He must uphold, whatever his own mind. (42)

Charles values his ascension to the role of king, and early in the play he says, "My life has been a ling'ring for the throne" (17). Later in the play he likens himself to an unread book:

CHARLES: I'm like a book myself, stuck on the shelf
For years, ignored and waiting, only judged
By one small sliver of the cover whole,
And sitting thus unopened and unused.
The outer surface gathers dust and fades
But if the moment comes to read the tome,
And it's removed and rarely opened up
The words and thoughts inside are here
As fresh and potent as the day of print." (111)

But Charles overestimates his authority as King, beyond serving as a ceremonial figurehead, to give "hope where hope/Had disappeared" (65). He is surprised to find that members of Parliament do not want him to have a say in determining what is passed into law. He says,

CHARLES: I always hoped as Crown I'd have some small
But crucial influence on the State
I'd given all my working life to serve. (33)

He explains to Mr. Evans that he cannot force himself to give assent to a bill that he does not agree with:

CHARLES: For if my name is given through routine
And not because it represents my view
Then soon I'll have no name, and nameless I
Have not myself, and having not myself,
Possess not mouth nor tongue nor brain, instead
I am an empty vessel, waiting for
Instruction, soulless and uncorporate,
And like I saw on television when
I was a younger man, I'm Charles no more

The human being, but transformed into
 A *Spitting Image* puppet, lying prone
 Upon the table waiting for some man
 To come and then inserting his own hand
 Do operate the image of the King
 Pretending life, a simulation of
 The outer skin with nothing in the heart. (55-56)

The Prime Minister and Opposition Leader are both adamant about the fact that the King has no right to pass judgment on a bill forwarded by Parliament. In the House of Commons, the Speaker has proposed a counter measure in the form of a bill to take away all together the King's authority to sign legislation into law, and the Prime Minister and Opposition Leader both support the bill. Mr. Stevens says,

MR STEVENS: Our Parliament exists to make sure that
 The people of our country do decide
 The codes and principles by which they live.
 It is a contract made between a man
 Or woman, and the State, by which both sides
 Must there agree, that citizen does have
 A voice and in return will keep the law.
 And so an intervention in this way
 That so removes the voice, but law remains
 Is absolutely wrong, and in this House
 Must every vote support this vital bill. (81)

Prime Minister Mr. Evans joins with his political adversary in support of limiting the authority of the King with the following statement:

MR EVENS: Although we have the Crown as head of State
 Both history and precedent do hold
 Him in his place. And now he oversteps
 So we must act and not impertinent
 Or rude, or out of disrespect but since
 We have no other choice than to protect
 Our democratic, British, way of life. (81)

Then, when Charles interrupts the vote and dissolves Parliament on the spot, the elected representatives are outraged, and the people of Great Britain take sides either for or against the King. Crowds on the street break into violence as those who are pro-monarchy jostle with those who are anti-monarchy. Charles's reacts by making a show of force—increasing the number of guards at Buckingham Palace and having a tank parked on the terrace in front of the Palace in view of the crowd. Violence breaks out in cities across Britain, and Mr. Evan's claims that "there is talk/Of civil war" (101). He describes the instability in Britain in the following way:

MR EVANS: . . . the schools have closed, police are stretched
 The bloodshed worsens every day we wait. (101)

Kate adds more details about the worsening state of affairs in England:

KATE: The British stock, which was considered safe
 Has in two whole weeks completely crashed. (101)

It becomes apparent to everyone surrounding the King that this instability could mean the end of the monarchy in Britain, and Kate claims that her father-in-law wants a *deus ex machina*, a savior, to rescue him from this difficult situation. Kate says,

KATE: But what he hope is that from out the blue
There'll grow a noise, a chopping engine sound
And through the clouds a helicopter comes
And lowering down its harness, scoops him up,
And quickly lifts the tired reckless man
To safety from the bleak and troubled rock. (99)

The *deus ex machina* comes, however, in a radical solution proposed by Kate, who reveals herself as the master politician.

Kate reveals her own political ambition to the audience in a long soliloquy, in which she derides the fact that, even in the twenty-first century, power remains so solidly in the hands of men. She says,

KATE: It is bewildering that even now
These little rooms of power are stocked full
With white, and southern, likely Oxbridge men.
Without the Queen, the bias is more stark
The King's a man, Prime Minister as well
Combine the benches of both sides
You'll have a female total of just four.
And so despite emancipation we must look
Towards the harder sex to find the power.
But I know nothing, just a plastic doll
Designed I'm told to stand embodying
A male-created bland and standard wife,
Whose only job is prettying the Prince, and then
If possible, get pregnant with the royal
And noble bump, to there produce some heirs.
And in all this I'm told I don't have thought
Or brains to comprehend my strange position.
But being underestimated so
Does give me what these men could never have
Since no one asked me what I think, I can
Observe and plan and learn the way to rule.
For I will be a Queen unlike the ones before [.]
My mother's dad was in the north a miner born
My father came from Leeds, and both of them
When young and inexperienced did risk
Their house and all they had to try and make
A business of their own. But it's not just this stock
I bring to these most distant realms
But something more important and precise [.]
I have ambition for my husband yes
And hope my son will grow the finest king
But if I must put up with taunts, and make

So public everything I am, then I
 Demand things for myself, I ask no less
 Than power to achieve my will in fair
 Exchange for total service to the State.
 Yes [,] this is what, enthroned, that I will do.
 Not simply help my husband to his crown
 But wear one of my own. (97-98)

Like Lady Macbeth, Kate is ready to advance her husband to kingship even if it means demanding Charles's abdication so that William and she will be crowned. Faced with Charles's stubbornness, which will likely result in the end of the monarchy, Kate does not hesitate to use her trump card, that is, the popularity of the Prince of Wales, his wife, and newly born son as the final argument for Charles's abdication, as we see in her retort to Camilla when she attempts to put William and Kate in their place:

KATE: Your thin opinion of us demonstrates
 How out of touch you are, and jealous too.
 Our looks don't make us cruel, our youth is not
 An ignorance, and detail in the way we dress
 Should not be thought as vanity, but is
 Part of the substance only we provide.
 We know the world. Our column inches are
 The greatest influence that we possess. (119)

Even Harry sees the wisdom in Kate's plan to ensure the continuation of the monarchy and says, "The people turn to William. This is/The only way. I am convinced" (120). Earlier in the play while influenced by Jess, Harry had announced that he wanted to leave the royal family to live an anonymous life. But his peregrinations on the streets at night (perhaps a parallel to Shakespeare's *Henry V* and "A little touch of Harry in the night") lead him to Paul, the kebab seller, who clarifies for Harry the importance of the King and Royal Family, who, even as figureheads, provide stability, continuity with the past, and a distinctive identity for the British people. The scene unfolds as follows:

Harry pays with a five-pound note. Paul looks at [the image of Queen Elizabeth on the banknote].

PAUL: Out of date now innit?

...

You know since she died. World's gone mad. I swear. Every night, people have this look. Bit like you— They come here, they want a kebab, a Coke, and it's like they're terrified. And I think I know why. They don't know where they live. They don't know what Britain is any more.

HARRY: What do you means?

PAUL: Slice by slice, Britain's less and less. You cut the army, that's one bit gone, squeeze the NHS, have Scotland threaten independence, the Post Office gone, the pubs shut, less, and less. Smaller all the time and when does Britain get so cut down, that it's not Britain any more?

HARRY: You think that's now?

PAUL: Well, the Queen's dead. If you take enough layers away, what have you got left, underneath, know what I mean? Maybe she was what held it together. (79)

At the end of the play in the coronation scene, Harry has no choice but to reject Jess, perhaps as Prince Hal had to reject the negative influence of Falstaff when he becomes Henry V. The scandal that surrounds

her salacious photos in the press work against William's attempt to restore order to the land, as Harry explains:

HARRY: My brother, talking with his wife, and close
Advisers, bearing all the photographs
And stories of your past that do appear, in mind.
Do feel it would be best you not attend [the coronation].
You are too big a risk to what
He needs: Stability— (124)

Mike Bartlett's play appears to be saying that, in the word of *realpolitik* there is no place for a man of principle such as Charles. The exigencies of trying to govern at this moment in time make the principled man a danger to the state, a danger to the status quo that people have come to expect, and a danger to the idea of the Royal Family as a "brand" (117), as William calls it. After Charles signs the official abdication document, he sums up what the dramatic situation of the play has done to his vision of being King Charles III. He says,

CHARLES: So there, it's done, the King is at an end.
I will retreat to bed, and when I wake
To a new dawn, I'll simply be an old
Forgotten gardener, who potters round
And talks to plants and chuckles to himself.
Whilest far away the King and Queen do rule
Over a golden age of monarchy,
That bothers no one, does no good, and is
A pretty plastic picture with no meaning. (121)

Through the recreation of a Shakespearean history play, Bartlett has achieved a perfect union of form and content to engage his audience in a "future-historical" drama with tragic overtones for his hero, Charles. The playwright is also able to advance in a very human way the lessons of *realpolitik* as they are evident in the practical realities of governing in a twenty-first-century world. The form of the five-act Shakespearean history play still has the power to intrigue us, to capture and keep our attention in the age of tweets, Facebook, and immediate and multitasked communications.

List of Works Cited

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