

Loss and the Quest for Identity in Mike Bartlett's *King Charles III*

A Research Presented by

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المستخلص

تقوم المسرحية بمعالجة الكثير من المواضيع من اهمها شعور الملك بالضياع والبحث عن الهوية واللدان يعاني منهما الملك تشارلز الثالث. حيث تقوم المسرحية بإظهار الملك كشخصية عجزه عنيده وغير سهلة. فعند استلامه العرش بعد وفاة والدته، بداء الملك في صراعاته مع رئيس الوزراء والبرلمان من اجل اثبات هوية الملك كحاكم اوحد مؤيد من الرب. فقد حاول التدخل في النظام السياسي وتخطي مركزه الشرفي عن طريق رفضه التوقيع على قانون تم التصديق عليه من قبل البرلمان. بالنسبة له فهي مسألة وجودية بينما بالنسبة للبرلمان فإنما هو تخطي لحدود الملك ومنصبه الشرفي.

كلمات مفتاحية: عنيد، ملك، البرلمان، الصراع، الضياع، الفوضى، الهوية

ABSTRACT

The play tackles many themes. One of the most important themes is the sense of loss and the quest for identity which King Charles suffers from. King Charles is delineated as an old, stubborn and uneasy character. When he comes to the throne after the death of his mother, he falls into struggle against the government represented by the Prime Minister and the parliament, with the aim to prove the identity of the king as a sole ruler supported by God. He tries to interfere into the political system and oversteps his ceremonial role by refusing to sign a bill that is agreed by the

parliament. For him this is a matter of existence, while for the Prime Minister and the parliament this is a kind of violation of his royal role and of democracy, and an overstepping of his bounds.

KEY WORDS: Stubborn, king, parliament, struggle, loss, identity.

The nowadays king of England, Charles III, has ascended to the throne after the death of his mother, Queen Elizabeth, on 8th September 2022. The character of King Charles III is controversial. As a crown prince, he has been under focus since the moment of his birth. His life has been a fresh material for the press. Unlike the other Crown Princes and his previous kings, Charles III was not taught at the palace by private tutors. He was sent to Hill House School in West London and then he became a boarder at Cheam School in Berkshire, which was attended by his father Prince Philip. After that he was sent to Gordonstoun, "a tough boarding school in Scotland where Philip had also studied. He described his time there as hell: he was lonely and bullied. 'A prison sentence,' he repeatedly said. 'Colditz with kilts'" (Holden). He was formally crowned Prince of Wales during his studies at Wales university and he faced almost daily protests from nationalists. Such upbringing resulted in shaping his controversial character.

As a young prince left in such boarding schools, he had to face supporters and racists against the monarchy and he had to deal with them as a prince not as a usual student. He was bullied and treated badly by his fellows, and this resulted in his hesitant and weak character. In his Reuters article "*Charles III, Britain's Conflicted New Monarch*", Michael Holden states:

To dictators, the new king is weak, vain, interfering, and ill-equipped for the role of sovereign. He has been ridiculed for talking to plants and obsessing over architecture and the environment, and will long be associated with his failed first marriage to the late Princess Diana.

Throughout his life, he has been living in such a dilemma of lost identity. He has been trying to satisfy all parts, but in vain. He was caught between trying to hold on tradition and coping with the fast-changing and more egalitarian society. He says in a TV documentary: "the trouble is you are in a no-win situation. If you do absolutely nothing at all ...they are going to complain about that... if you try and get stuck in, do something to help, they also complain". As Holden continues, Charles is known for his contempt for media and the press, and calling them "bloody people". While media wants to focus on his private life, he wants to speak about things he likes, and he is not ashamed of showing his devotions, which are criticized by the press; for example, his saying that he speaks with his plants and shake hands with his trees. Some media labeled him "a crank who would rather be a farmer than a prince"(Holden).

According to the photographer Tom Bower, the king is stubborn and unable to take criticism himself; "he is a person who is driven, who undoubtedly wants to do good but does not understand that the consequences of a lot of his actions cause a lot of trouble"(Holden). Also he is known for his interference in spat with the government over its policies, the thing that led the Daily Mail to say in its editorial that "if he's not very careful, those

disagreeing with his provocative political interventions may also conclude Britain's constitutional monarchy is no longer worth keeping,"; the thing which he confirms that it will never happen when he becomes a king, for being a prince is different from being a king for him. In his play *King Charles III*, Mike Bartlett manages to portrait such uneasy, stubborn, and easily motivated character and makes it clear that such character is the main reason for the destruction of his reign even before it formally starts. He manages to show that Charles's sense of loss and his quest for identity and existence as the divine king of England is the reasons for the destruction of his reign.

Written in 2014, *King Charles III* by Mike Bartlett delineates the character of the crown Prince Charles and builds expectations on what he is going to become as a king if he keeps sticking into his character and methods, and if he keeps trying to impose his views and trying to have his say in the system of government in the light of his struggle to find his true identity and to end his sense of loss. In this play Bartlett manages to use chaos theory as a skeleton upon which he builds this "Shakespearean tragedy", as Sam Wollaston calls it in his review in *the Guardian*.

In spite of the fact that *King Charles III* is a play written during metamodernism, the play is delineated as a Shakespearean tragedy that is based on iambic pentameter. *King Charles III* follows the tragic plot of a Shakespearean drama. It has an exposition, a rising action, a climax, a falling action, and a resolution. Like a Shakespearean tragedy, the plot starts with an exposition in which

the author and the audience expect a specific course for the development of the actions. However, as the play moves on, this course inverts to the opposite and everything comes upside down. The play starts with the funeral of Queen Elizabeth, and the eyes focusing on the new King Charles III. Hopes are hanging on him that he will start a new reign, and expectations are on him that he will hold on tradition and constitution.

It is supposed that King Charles keeps and respects tradition, and keeps the political system the same as it was during the time of his mother with only slight changes which are agreed by the parliament and other political forces, and which enable the country to cope with the international progress. These expectations are the initial conditions which start the course of the reign of Charles III in this play, and which are going to face slight changes that are going to escalate consequently in a chaotic unpredicted course that ends with the destruction of the reign of this new king even before it starts.

Charles chooses by his own will to violate tradition and to intrude into the tasks of the parliament. He chooses to change the ceremonial right of the king into having an effective say in politics. He even contempts the traditional role of his new position and how he is supposed to attend meetings and press conferences. From the beginning of the play Charles's hidden intent to change and violate tradition is made clear. James Reiss, the press secretary of the king, comes to tell him about the press conference in which he is supposed to appear with the Prime Minister in order to ensure that

the state and the king are together and that tradition and settlement are kept. When James leaves him alone his true intent is revealed in a soliloquy saying that he is going to change all this:

CHARLES:

Such equal billing was a joy when Prince.

To share the stage did spread attention out.

But now I'll rise to how things have to be

The queen is dead, long live the King. That's me. (Bartlett 13-14)

Such thoughts and intents of "a thoughtful Prince", as he calls himself, moves him to try to change tradition and to make the slight change to the initial conditions or the tragic flaw for this tragic plot (Bartlett 12). He decides to take a step towards trying to ensure the divine right of the king and towards starting the struggle with the parliament to ensure his identity as a king supported by God, in order to end his suffering of the sense of loss. He decides to intrude into the work of the parliament. He violates tradition which gives the king the ceremonial right to sign acts that are approved by the parliament. He refuses to sign a bill which restricts the freedom of the press though it is approved by both houses.

For the parliament and the Prime Minister there should be an act that withholds the press from getting into personal issues and destroying lives. Such actions should not go without punishment. For the king it is a matter of principles. If the press fears punishment, they are not going to reveal truths, and there will not be a force that watches and threatens politicians to do their job in

the best way. The first point of confrontation between the king and the Prime Minister, Mr Evans, starts when the king shows resentment for signing the bill and asks Evans to modify it. The Prime Minister sees this as violation of tradition and democracy, and as an attempt made by the king to leave his ceremonial position and overstep into politics.

And so the clash starts to take place between the stubborn king and the parliament. Evans makes it clear that this is a parliamentary matter and that he will not accept or allow for any intrusion made by the king:

EVANS:

Your views mean much, but on this subject yes.

I disagree with what you think and if

You want my true intent, I will say more:

That even if there was a chance to change

The bill to take account of what you think.

I would not see it done. The public vote

To choose the members of their parliament

And that is where decision will be made

Not in this room between the two of us.

But sir, now please, it matters not, because

The law is drawn, and voted on and passed (Bartlett 20-21)

As a weak and stubborn character, King Charles III falls as a prey into the clutches of Stevens, the opposition leader, who plays the role of the devil in this play. He is a politician devil who manipulates the king for his own benefit. And though Charles knows that Stevens manipulates him, he is influenced by his views. Stevens meets Charles after the departure of Evans and persuades him that he has the right of not signing the bill. And though it is a ceremonial right, Charles can use it and stop the bill from passing. Charles follows these views, starting the rising action to the chaotic trajectory of the fate of this stubborn king. And so the trajectory moves from the beginning down to its following up. Meanwhile, Stevens goes to meet the Prime Minister and ensures that he is supporting his views against the king's and that the king has bounds that he cannot surpass, and that his interference into politics is not acceptable.

Henceforth, the Prime Minister goes to meet the king in order to persuade him to change his mind and to sign the bill. But the king refuses to sign the bill before it is modified. Charles regards his signature as a matter of life or death, a matter of identity and existence. He sees it as an approval of his existence as a king. Moreover, he does not want history to mention him as the king who allowed for the restriction of the press. He wants to prove that the king should have a say in controlling the issues of his country.

The confrontation between the king and the Prime Minister marks the beginning of the rising action or the trajectory from the starting "Down" towards the "Up" or the climax.

CHARLES:

.....

The pen dries up, my hand it cannot write.

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 unincorporate,

And like I saw on television when

I was a younger man, I'm Charles no more (Bartlett 38–39)

Escalations take place and the trajectory of the rising action moves towards the "Up" or the climax. Evans speaks to the press in a conference explaining the point of disagreement, and showing the king's reluctance to acquiesce to the people's will exemplified in the members of the parliament who state this act. He considers this

reluctance as surpassing of his bounds as a king and as a surpassing of democracy.

As a subsequent event, King Charles speaks from Buckingham palace to the people on television defending his own situation. He asks the people to understand his situation, and asks the parliament and the government to respect his views and to try to have a solution to this problem:

CHARLES:

.....

As king, and servant to the populous,

Request your understanding, and your trust,

That this, a rare but necessary act

Is not me stepping too far from the throne,

But is my duty and fulfilling what

The King or Queen is sworn by oath to do. (Bartlett 42)

Responding to the King's refusal to give assent, the parliament gathers to ensure the passing of a law that excludes the crown from giving assent to laws passed by the parliament. The leader of the opposition, Stevens, starts the parliamentary session attacking the King and accusing him of surpassing of his bounds and of not respecting democracy. Meanwhile, two days before this session, this

same leader of opposition, Stevens, goes to the king in an unofficial visit to warn him that the parliament is going to make this session in order to pass a law that prevents the king from the right to sign acts passed by the parliament. He enhances this struggle between the King and the parliament once by convincing the king of not signing the bill and another time by reminding him of his successive king William the Fourth. He also convinces the king to do what king William IV has done with his parliament in a similar situation.

Working only for his own benefit, Mr. Stevens, whispers into the ears of King Charles of things that leads to the destruction of the royal system and of the whole kingdom. With his devilish intents Stevens reminds the king of William IV's successful attempt to dissolve the parliament, and how William was able to pass his constitutional reforms and to set new parliamentary elections.

Although Mr. Stevens reminds King Charles III with the successful attempt of his ancestor William IV, he does not mention the failure of King Charles I (1625-1649) who, when dissolving the parliament, led the country to the civil war (Hickman). The time of king Charles I marked a long history of the struggle between the king and the parliament, the struggle which led to civil wars and ended with the execution of the king and turning England into a republic (Masson).

Meanwhile, douches Kate, the crown prince's wife, feels the danger of her father in law's decisions. His stubbornness drives him to make decisions without consulting the family members, and

unfortunately these decisions are going to destroy the future of her husband and son, and of the whole monarchy. She decides to take a step and to convince her husband to try to stop his father from making wrong decisions. However, William refuses to argue with his father and refuses to transfer such political division into the family.

Kate refuses to surrender. A day before the parliamentary session, she sends to the Prime Minister to meet her and her husband in order to explain to William the dangerous situation which the monarchy falls into because of his father's stubbornness and wrong decisions, and to convince him to save his future as a king and the future of his son.

The rising action of this chaotic trajectory comes to its climax when King Charles appears at the doors of the parliament during the session of his exclusion. Following Steven's advice, Charles III goes to the parliament bare headed without a crown and dissolves the parliament, the same as king William has done, determining at this point the climax or the 'up' for this chaotic trajectory.

King Charles walks in, without a crown, but regally dressed.

The Members of Parliament stand. The King stands opposite the

speaker.

CHARLES:

Empowered by ancient decree I do,

As King of England, Northern Ireland, Wales

And Scotland, use my royal prerogative

To here dissolve the parliament at once. (Bartlett 61-62)

Charles III does not take into consideration the aftermath of his wrong decision and the dilemma that he leads his country to. He is completely separated from reality. The falling down and deterioration of this trajectory starts to escalate. Chaos and riot spreads like fire in straw everywhere in the country. People protest and revolt in front of the palace gates condemning his deeds while he sees their shouting as cheers for his good deeds. He locks himself at his office in the palace, proud of what he has done and separated from reality.

Watching the deteriorating situation and the chaos that overwhelms the country, Kate sends to the Prime Minister and the head of the Metropolitan Police, Sir Michael, in a way to convince William to take a step towards saving the monarchy and the future of her family. Their conversation shows that chaos has widely spread in all fields.

SIR MICHAEL:

Last night saw violence sparks across the land.

In Liverpool, a protest made towards
 The Mersey, lifting effigy they'd built
 Based on your father, burnt it bright, then dropped
 It in the sea. In Oxford marches have
 Formed on both sides and even as we speak
 They clash. In Edinburgh, the same, Belfast.

.....
 But London is the worst—

We are

Your Highness, much too stretched.

WILLIAM:

Then find reserves

To flood the streets.

SIR MICHAEL:

Reserves are out. No more

To come. We'll maybe last another day. (Bartlett 78)

Moreover, chaos spreads to all services including schools, transport, health the stock, the political life and the parliament. Schools are closed, doctors have stretched in streets because bloodshed worsens day after another. The British stock, as Kate states, has completely crashed. Meanwhile, Mr Stevens, the leader of the opposition, has questioned the right of Evans to continue as a Prime Minister and to make decisions. The parliament has no legitimacy anymore and has turned into a meeting of men. All these events take place while the king, as Evans tell William, "has generals

round to tea, and parks\ A tank in Buckingham Palace grounds.\ Perhaps exaggeration but there is a talk\ Of civil war" (Bartlett 79).

Through all this chaos William continues to refuse to take any step against his father. However, Kate and Evans continue to press on him till he finally surrenders and decides to interfere. Subsequently, the falling actions of this plot move on, with the chaotic trajectory of this miserable king moving towards its down. William, Kate, Evans, James, and even Harry plot against the king for what they see as the benefit of the country and the monarchy. James convinces the king to make a press conference in order to show his views to the people "...My fear is that/ Without your voice in consent heard\ The public mood will turn away. And so\You must here stand, and meet the press" (Bartlett 82). William and Kate surprise Charles to attend the conference. He becomes very happy as they deceive him of coming to give support.

While the conference is about to start William moves his father aside and speaks instead of him to the press. He announces that he has mediated between the king and the parliament and has achieved an agreement to stop this riot, and that the king applies his consent over this agreement. Charles leaves the conference with anger and retreats to his office among his books of history, trying to search in the pages of history for what proves to him that he is moving in the right way to prove the complete control of a king over his country because he is supported by God. Bartlett makes it clear that the main problem with King Charles is his being separated

from reality, isolated, self-centered, lost, proud and stubborn character, who is haunted by his mistakes and who suffers lack of wisdom and wrong judgment. Such points of weakness in his character drive him to quest for his identity as a king, trying to find salvation for his sense of loss. After the press conference he speaks with James about how this mediation is going to fail, and how he is going to sit alone in his office waiting for resolutions from God because he is supported by God:

CHARLES:

It matters not. It will not work. For I
Am not in need of mediation here.
There is no common ground, no compromise.
Anointed not by man, but God, I don't
Negotiate but issue my commands. (Bartlett 87-88)

Following the press conference William sends to Sir Gordon and orders him to remove all the tanks and the soldiers standing before the palace, and then he goes to meet his father in his office accompanied with Kate, Harry and Evans, in order to force his father to sign abdication. The confrontation between William and Charles shows how he is possessed by his idea of the quest for the identity of the king and the idea of the sole ruler. Also how he tries to give the king powers that are not his own and are not granted to him by the English constitution and tradition.

Henceforth, their conversation has come to no solution. Charles is stubborn. He holds on his opinions and refuses to retreat. Also the parliament is not going to hold new elections as Charles

commands. Therefore, William suggests that new king and queen are to sit on the throne on the coronation day, and that Charles should step aside and declare abdication to William and his wife Kate as new king and queen for England. As Charles refuses, Evans enters holding the paper of abdication and is followed by Camilla, Harry and Kate. Camilla tries to give support for Charles, but the other three (Kate, Harry and William) threaten Charles to leave him live alone in the palace and to not return again with their children. Charles surrenders and signs the abdication putting in this way an end to his reign, to this chaotic trajectory, and to the thunder of thoughts filling his head, and above all to his suffering of the sense of loss. Finally he returns back as an old settled citizen, achieving equilibrium to along trajectory of chaos and unsettlement. Now he has retreated to be an old man living with his grandchildren and among his plants, ending his reign even before its start. His sense of loss and isolation is intensified when Williams and Harry threaten him to take the grand children and leave him alone. He fears to be alone and surrenders to their desire of abdication:

CHARLES:

I cannot live alone.

They all look at him

The greatest king?

A pause

He signs

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.
Whilst 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.

He goes (Bartlett 98)

Though the chaotic trajectory ends at that point, the play ends with the coronation day with Charles putting the crown on the head of his son King William by his own hands.

In order to enhance the postmodern and metamodern sense of orderly chaos, the play has another chaotic subplot that is tactfully woven into the strings of the main plot. It is the plot of the lost soul of Prince Harry. From the beginning of the play, Harry is delineated as suffering a sense of loss and disbelonging. He leaves the funeral of his grandmother the queen in order to go to a night club to meet his royally chosen friends to drink some liquor. He encounters a girl who is secular or socialist and who faces him with his truth about his lost tortured soul. He gets attracted to her and asks her to lead him to the way to get rid of his loss.

The appearance of Jessica in the dynamical system of the life of Harry marks the slight change which is going to create chaos into this system. Their relationship develops quickly and he takes her to the palace. This trajectory or this subplot starts to move up towards its climax when an ex-boyfriend of Jessica appears in her life

knowing about her new affair with the prince and asks her for money instead of giving her photos to the press. Jess tries to get help from James, but he refuses. Therefore, she decides to leave Harry. The climax of this plot, or the Up of this chaotic trajectory, comes when Harry searches for Jessica among the protestors and takes her to the king. He asks the king to allow him to get rid of the princely life and of all titles and to marry Jessica.

Harry's sense of loss is highlighted when he tries to convince his father to get rid of his royal life. He explains to him how Jessica has changed his chaotic life and led him to settlement.

HARRY.

But let me tell you she is something else
To anything our family has known
I suddenly can see my life before
Was full of stupid idiocy to so
Distract me from a sadness kept within
Distract me cos I had nothing to love, (Bartlett 72)

However, this trajectory was going to end a happy ending if it was not for the toppling of William against his father. William asks Harry for his brotherly duties beside his princely ones. He asks his brother for support. Harry finds himself in crossroads between his love, his true self and true life, and his duties. However, he chooses his duties and his support for his brother. He ends his relationship with Jessica who is considered a threat to his brother's new title because of her press scandal. He chooses to continue to live his chaotic royal life of loss and to continue to quest for his lost identity, ending in this way his relationship with Jessica. He

continues to live in his life of chaos and destruction. He achieves equilibrium through achieving satisfaction with his life of loss as a prince in this royal family. Henceforth, the chaos which occurred in this system has ended with equilibrium. And Chaos Theory manages to oscillate in this play between the chaos and the equilibrium in a metamodern way.

CONCLUSION

Chaos Theory is used in this research as a methodology. The research draws a comparison between Chaos Theory and plot structure and proves that the theory can work as a substitute to the plot, showing that under the chaotic pretense there should exist a tactful order which manages to deliver the themes.

The play highlights the theme of loss and quest for identity as a motif of Postmodernism. It has a well-constructed plot in spite of giving and stressing the sense of loss and chaos which are faces of postmodernism. However, it ends also in a metamodern way with achieving equilibrium to the tortured souls. Charles's loss and dilemma end by turning to become an ordinary man not a king who quests for his identity as a king. Harry's chaotic affair with his girl, Jessica, comes to a settled end, which means that Harry keeps living and keeps trying to accustom to his royal loss.

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