



"My great problem in life is that I do not really know what my role in life is," Charles once said, adding, "I must find one." Photo illustration by Alma Haser for The New Yorker; Source photographs from Getty

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CAN CHARLES KEEP QUIET AS KING?

As Prince of Wales, Charles was always ready with an opinion. Now, with his coronation at hand, his job is to have none.

By Rebecca Mead

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When King Charles III was a young prince, in the early nineteen-fifties, he sometimes propelled a ride-on toy around Windsor Castle,

one of several royal residences where he spent his childhood. Pedalling furiously, he hardly registered the spectacular works from the Royal Collection on the walls. “It’s just a background,” Charles later recalled. His attention was arrested, however, by one unusual portrait: of King Charles I, displayed in the Queen’s Ballroom. The sensitive and reflective prince, who was born in 1648 and who by the age of seven was being tutored by a governess in the history of the nation—and of his historic family—was fascinated by the painting. “King Charles lived for me in that room in the castle,” he later said.

Titled “Charles I in Three Positions,” and painted in the sixteen-thirties by Van Dyck, the work offers three representations of the elegant monarch: in profile, facing forward, and in three-quarter view. With his long, flowing hair cut fashionably shorter on one side, he is depicted wearing three distinct robes and three ornate lace collars, and he is accessorized with the blue sash of the Order of the Garter, Britain’s oldest chivalric order. The painting was made about a decade after Charles’s accession, in 1625, and was used as a blueprint for a marble bust by Bernini. Charles I—who was devout, reserved, and convinced of his right to absolute power as the head of the Stuart dynasty—was a great patron of the arts. Among other extravagant commissions, he asked Rubens to decorate the ceiling of the grand Banqueting House, in London’s Palace of Whitehall, with canvases illustrating heavenly approval of James I, his father.

The triple portrait may have commanded the young Prince Charles’s attention because of his royal precursor’s lurid fate: Charles I had the distinction of being the only British king to be tried for treason and executed. He was sentenced to death by a High Court of Justice, set up by a Parliament that he had antagonized by dissolving it repeatedly, which helped bring about devastating years of civil war. On November 18, 1648—nearly three hundred years to the day before the birth of Charles, on November 14th—the King’s opponents argued in the House of Commons that “the

Person of the King may and shall be proceeded against in a way of justice for the blood spilt.” After a brief trial, the royal head was publicly severed from the royal shoulders, on a scaffold outside the Banqueting House. The monarchy was abolished a week later, the office of the king declared by the Commons as “unnecessary, burdensome, and dangerous to the liberty, safety, and public interest of the people of this nation.” The Puritan republic lasted only eleven years, after which Parliament voted to install on the throne Charles II, the licentious eldest surviving son of the deposed king. But the powers of the restored monarchy were more limited, and by the late seventeenth century the Glorious Revolution had affirmed the idea that British kings and queens retain their crowns only by the consent of the people.

Van Dyck’s triple portrait is, on its own terms, irresistibly suggestive of the psychological complexity of its royal subject. The king in profile has a heavy brow: he appears thoughtful, even melancholy. The three-quarter king, who wears a dandyish pearl earring, has a faraway look in his eye, and a faint smile plays at the corner of his mouth. The forward-facing king appears supremely self-assured, even arrogant. For the young Charles, the principal fascination of the triple portrait may well have been in its proto-photographic quality—a high-class mug shot of a king ultimately judged to be a criminal. But the portrait might also have suggested to the Prince—who would already have learned that he was destined to become Britain’s third King Charles—that to be a monarch is to be a divided self, in a role that is sometimes precariously split among the constitutional, the institutional, and the personal. Being a king is not just one thing.

After Queen Elizabeth II died, at the age of ninety-six, on September 8, 2022, King Charles III delivered a televised speech—his first public address as monarch. His eyes were rheumy and his complexion florid; his hair, thoroughly silver, was brushed as carefully as it had been in 1953 when, as a fidgety four-year-old, he had endured his mother’s almost three-hour-

long coronation service, in Westminster Abbey. “Queen Elizabeth’s was a life well lived, a promise with destiny kept,” he said, in a speech that was praised for its emotionality and steadiness. He also proclaimed, “That promise of lifelong service I renew to you all today.”

The Queen’s astonishing longevity in the role of monarch—she lasted for seventy years, a full seven years longer than Queen Victoria—has a corollary in Charles’s own, less triumphant statistical attributes. He is the oldest British monarch to have ascended to the throne, at seventy-three. (His wife, Camilla, who has been given the title of Queen Consort, is a year older.) Charles, whose coronation is scheduled for May 6th, has been the longest-serving Prince of Wales, a title bestowed on him by the Queen when he was an introverted nine-year-old. Already the Duke of Cornwall, a title that he had received upon his mother’s accession, he learned of this latest honor while at prep school. Invited to watch the televised announcement in his headmaster’s study, Charles was mortified by the congratulations of his fellow-pupils. It was, he later said, the moment when he first saw clearly the “awful truth” of his singular fate.



“Attention, passengers, this train will be running express to whichever stop is after yours.”

Cartoon by Asher Perlman

Has it really been so awful? Perhaps. Unlike the former Prime Minister Boris Johnson, Charles didn't dream as a child of being “World King,” and he has long made it clear that he considers his birthright a burden. “Nobody knows what utter hell it is to be the Prince of Wales,” he has reportedly complained. Although Charles is literally the most entitled man in the land, a royal can feel like an anachronism, and he apparently feels a kinship with certain other Britons who are marginalized. Paddy Harverson, the Prince's former communications secretary, says that Charles has a particular fondness for the sheep farmers of remote Cumbria, “because they are about the most forgotten community you can find.”

Tom Parker Bowles—Charles's godson, and later his stepson—grew up thinking that Charles's name was Sir, because that's all anyone ever called him. Yet Sir suffers from a peculiar aristocratic version of impostor syndrome. He is wise enough to know that, in almost any room he enters other than one occupied by members of his family, he is likely to be the only person present whose power and influence derive entirely from his birth. Indeed, if Charles checked his privilege, there would be nothing left of him—just a crumpled pile of ermine and velvet, and a faint whiff of Eau Sauvage.

Harverson says that Charles's self-consciousness about being a royal drove him to become “the hardest-working man I know,” adding, “First thing in the morning, he does his exercises and has his abstemious breakfast, working on his papers over breakfast. Before he goes to bed, any time up to midnight,

he'll be doing more work—and all the points in between.”

At the beginning, this work was rather nebulous. The position of Prince of Wales has no specified constitutional purpose or duties, as Charles discovered as a young man, when he instructed his staff to research precedents and possibilities, and found no guidance. During his twenties, he spent several years in the Royal Air Force and the Royal Navy. In a speech that he delivered at his alma mater, the University of Cambridge, on the eve of his thirtieth birthday, he admitted, “My great problem in life is that I do not really know what my role in life is.” He added, “Somehow I must find one.” Charles, who subsequently told an interviewer that it would be “criminally negligent” of him to do nothing, has started more than a dozen charities, including the Prince’s Trust, and has served as the patron of scores of others. He has spoken out for decades on causes about which he is passionate, from organic farming and town planning to education and alternative medicine, leveraging his fame in a way that is constitutionally denied to the monarch, who must remain staunchly apolitical. (Luckily for the Queen, her chief passion was horses.) A few years ago, he urgently summoned the composer Andrew Lloyd Webber to his office to present an idea. “He was worried about . . . the fact that there wasn’t enough access for young people to go and learn how to play the church organ,” Lloyd Webber told the *Washington Post*. In April, 2021, Charles marked International Organ Day with a message to the Royal College of Organists, urging its members to secure the future viability of what, as he reminded them, Mozart had described as the “King of Instruments.”

Charles could have spent his anticipatory decades like some former heirs to the throne: devoting himself to hunting and wenching. To be fair, he’s done a bit of both. He was an avid foxhunter until the activity was outlawed, in 2005; he characterized it as reflecting “man’s ancient, and, indeed, romantic relationship with dogs and horses.” As for other romantic relationships: long before Prince Harry spilled his guts, in a tell-all memoir, “Spare,” about losing his virginity in a field behind a pub, Charles’s sanctioned biographer,

Jonathan Dimbleby, wrote humbly in 1994 of his subject's deflowering at Cambridge by an early paramour, described as a "young South American" who had "instructed an innocent Prince in the consummation of physical love."

But, in general, Charles has conducted his role as monarch-in-waiting with laudable earnestness. One need not go so far as to say that he has the makings of a saint—as the Reverend Harry Williams, a former dean of the chapel at Trinity College, Cambridge, once did—to believe that the country could have done much worse. Kings can be dreadful. Until the birth of Prince William, in 1982, the world was just one helicopter accident or foxhunting tumble away from the prospect of King Andrew I.

People who know Charles sometimes describe him as a cuckoo in the royal nest—someone quite unlike the other members of his family. He inherited neither the stoicism of his mother nor the emotional imperviousness of his father, Prince Philip. Charles was born into a family so formal and hidebound that, when the newly crowned Queen Elizabeth ordained that her children would no longer be expected to bow or curtsy when entering her presence, the move was seen as wildly progressive. Whereas his bold younger sister, Anne, used to march up and down in front of the sentries at Buckingham Palace in order to oblige them to present arms, as if darting before automatic sliding doors in a hotel lobby, Charles cringed at his own authority. As a young man, he considered himself "a 'single' person that prefers to be alone and is happy just with hills or trees as companions." Later, Charles was indelibly defined in contrast with his first wife, Princess Diana, who was "the great, emotional, open, sensitive one," as Catherine Mayer, one of Charles's more subtle recent biographers, observes. "The irony is that he was seen as this stone creature, but in fact he's far more like her than like other members of his own family, in many ways."

Charles readily prioritizes intuition over analytic thought, especially if it's his

own intuition that's being prioritized. "He doesn't allow debate," Tom Bower, the author of a mostly-warts biography, says. "It's his *droit du seigneur*—he doesn't like contradiction, whether within his causes or his office." He's not exactly an intellectual, but he is a reader, especially of history, and compared with his parents and his siblings he's a raving brainbox. A first-gen university student who benefitted from a bespoke affirmative-action program—no other first-year student at Trinity College had his own set of rooms, and a detective on hand—Charles is a passionate defender of the cultural canon. He knows by heart long passages of Shakespeare, which, as he told *Dimbleby*, can "in moments of stress or danger or misery" give "enormous comfort and encouragement." (It's not hard to see how certain stylings of the Bard—"This royal throne of Kings, this sceptred isle"—might buck up a demoralized monarch-to-be.)

Like the works of Shakespeare, or church-organ music, the monarchy is something that once was inarguably valued but now must make a case for its relevance. It is no secret that Charles believes the modern world to have gone to hell, in any number of ways; although such thinking is not unusual for a septuagenarian, few individuals can be as invested in the matter as Charles, whose whole gig is to be a symbol of tradition. Twenty years ago, a letter that he had written emerged in the course of an employment lawsuit brought by a former employee at Clarence House, his royal residence in London, and his words betrayed a similarly intemperate view of contemporary culture. "What is wrong with people nowadays?" he wrote. "Why do they all seem to think they are qualified to do things far above their capabilities?" He went on to blame "a child-centered education system which tells people they can become pop stars, high court judges, or brilliant TV presenters or infinitely more competent heads of state without ever putting in the necessary work or having the natural ability." He concluded with a grand flourish: "It is a result of social utopianism which believes humanity can be genetically engineered to contradict the lessons of history." Charles did not dilate further on what those lessons might be. But it's safe to assume that they'd justify one of the

most notorious compromises struck between the claims of the genetic and of the social: the existence of a hereditary sovereign within a constitutional monarchy.

“**T**his is a call to revolution”—so reads the grabby first sentence of “Harmony: A New Way of Looking at Our World,” a book that Charles published in 2010. The future king was quick to clarify that the sort of revolution he was calling for was not the monarch-deposing kind. He went on, “The Earth is under threat. It cannot cope with all that we demand of it. It is losing its balance and we humans are causing this to happen.” We must, he wrote, embark on a “Sustainability Revolution.”

Charles has long held strong views on environmental matters: in the seventies, he warned of the dangers of pollution, and by the early eighties he had become an outspoken advocate of organic farming and a critic of industrial agribusiness. At the time, he was often dismissed as a crank. A 1984 article in the *Daily Mirror* imagined the future king sitting “cross-legged on the throne wearing a kaftan and eating muesli”—little realizing how mainstream these activities would become, except for the throne-sitting. In a 1982 speech, Charles lamented, “Perhaps we just have to accept that it is God’s will that the unorthodox individual is doomed to years of frustration, ridicule, and failure in order to act out his role in the scheme of things, until his day arrives, and mankind is ready to receive his message.”

Ian Skelly, one of Charles’s two co-authors on “Harmony” and a writer who has helped him with speeches, says, “A lot of people have quietly realized that he was right all along about a lot of this. There’s always a lot of people who did take him seriously, but the vast majority thought he was up there in the trees with the fairies.” Charles’s criticisms of factory farming and of the use of artificial pesticides have become widespread, though the sustainability practices reportedly carried out at Highgrove, his beloved country residence in Gloucestershire, are beyond the capacities of most farmers: according to

Tom Bower, a team of four gardeners lie face down on a trailer as it is dragged by a slow-moving Land Rover, so that they can pull up weeds.

Charles has also been unafraid to criticize powerful bodies of experts such as the British Medical Association, whose ire he earned forty years ago by unfavorably contrasting contemporary medicine with ancient folk healing, in particular homeopathy, and by comparing the modern medical establishment to “the celebrated Tower of Pisa—slightly off balance.” (A doctor with the B.M.A. subsequently declared homeopathy to be “nonsense on stilts.”) He is notoriously hostile to modern architecture, and, in a vitriolic 1987 speech to a gathering of distinguished British planners and designers, he proclaimed, “You have, ladies and gentlemen, to give this much to the Luftwaffe—when it knocked down our buildings, it didn’t replace them with anything more offensive than rubble. *We* did that.” Charles’s remarks bring to mind the Internet era’s Godwin’s law, which holds that once an argument escalates online someone inevitably invokes the Nazis; usually, though, the comparison is not in the Nazis’ favor. Once, while on a tour of a fifty-story office building that César Pelli had designed for the Canary Wharf area of London, Charles querulously asked, “Why does it need to be quite so high?” This remark prompted another member of the tour—the art historian Roy Strong—to observe that, if people had thought that way in the Middle Ages, there would be no spire atop Salisbury Cathedral. Charles made no reply—but, then again, we know how he feels about the Tower of Pisa.

Such rampant position-taking was often understood to be evidence of a butterfly mind, flitting from one issue to another. As Dimbleby, his biographer, put it, “He approached new ideas like a swimmer diving among rocks: sometimes he discovered a pearl and sometimes he banged himself on the head.” The press portrayed Charles as “the meddling prince,” suggesting that his interventions—including unsolicited memos to government ministers—both undermined professional expertise and ran counter to his future role. The King now has a weekly audience with the Prime Minister, during which he can quietly offer advice. (“Back again? Dear, oh dear” was Charles’s rather ungracious greeting to the hapless Liz Truss in October.) But the British monarch is, by convention, obliged to sign into law whatever the government puts in front of him, whether he agrees with it or not.

Charles is easy to condemn as out of touch. Bower’s book devilishly recounts an occasion when the Prince’s kitchen staff left him some cold cuts for a late supper. He shrieked with horror and called for Camilla’s aid—apparently, it was his first encounter with cling film. Having spent a lifetime being characterized by the press as a foggy, an oddball, or a nostalgist, Charles had an opportunity, in “Harmony,” to present a self-portrait, and a self-defense. In the book, he seeks to demonstrate how his apparently disparate concerns—architecture, farming, climate change—are in fact linked. Each of them, he argues, is an expression of the absence of “harmony”—a concept that he defines as “the active state of balance which is just as vital to the health of the natural world as it is for human society.” In many ways, the book is profoundly conservative: an idyllic image of crofters’ huts in the Yorkshire Dales is paired with a dystopian shot of tower blocks and industrial chimneys in Dundee, Scotland, as if the former could perform the same function as the latter. But “Harmony” is also surprisingly radical in its rejection of the inevitability of consumer capitalism. “Real wealth is good land, pristine forests, clean rivers, healthy animals, vibrant communities, nourishing food and human creativity,” Charles writes. “But the money managers have turned land, forests, rivers, animals and human creativity into commodities to be

bought and sold.”

Ian Skelly says of Charles, “He’s met every expert you can imagine, and is deeply informed about a massive range of subjects.” Skelly notes, “He says he can’t remember anything, but don’t talk to him about sheep! Don’t talk to him about flora and fauna.” Charles’s concern and commitment are transparently heartfelt, even if his solutions can seem arcane: it was recently announced that his vintage Aston Martin has been converted to run on surplus wine and leftover cheese whey.

Charles is known to have some frugal habits—he gets his clothes patched rather than having them replaced. Still, in other respects, his life is one of excess. The *Guardian* recently estimated that the King’s privately held assets, which include property, jewelry, horses, and vintage cars, have a collective value of nearly two and a quarter billion dollars. (In an indignant response, the Palace said that the figures were “a highly creative mix of speculation, assumption and inaccuracy,” but declined to offer an accurate tally.) And though only the most uncompromising of republicans would deny that a king needs a castle, or two, Charles has access to more palatial homes than the most advantageously equipped plutocrats. His estates range from Windsor Castle to Sandringham House and Balmoral Castle—and those are just the ones that he’s recently taken over from the Queen. The monarch does not pay an inheritance tax. For many Britons, it can feel strange to be lectured on the need to reduce consumption by someone whose family has arrogated so much to itself.

“Harmony” is perhaps most valuable for revealing how Charles would prefer to be understood: as a philosopher-king who, unlike a politician vulnerable to the whims of an electorate, is in a position to take the long view.

“‘Harmony’ was seen by some people as an environmental book, but it’s not just that,” Tony Juniper, an environmentalist and the book’s other co-author, says. “It’s a philosophy book about the place of people in the universe.”

Charles describes ancient practices—the geometrical patterns of sacred

architecture; farming techniques that respected rather than depleted the soil—that underscore how humanity once saw itself as integrated with Nature rather than elevated above her. (For the King, Nature is capitalized and female.) Khaled Azzam, the director of the Prince's Foundation School of Traditional Arts, in London, which since 2005 has taught subjects as diverse as illuminated-manuscript-making and the principles of Islamic architecture, says, "His Majesty has always been interested in humanity as a whole, not humanity in its fragmented form."

As Charles sees it, human civilization made its first errant turn in the seventeenth century, with the onset of the scientific revolution and the subsequent prioritizing of rationalism and secularism over other systems of thought. He writes reverently of Indigenous cultures, noting that the Kogi people, of present-day Colombia, see themselves as an "Elder Brother" created "to protect the Earth, whom they inevitably call the Mother"; they must also contend with "a Younger Brother, a wayward creature . . . whose ways must be curbed before it is too late." The Charles of "Harmony" is given to pronouncements like this: "The Enlightenment caused wonderful things to happen, but I do wish that the champions of mechanistic science would be more prepared than they are to accept that it also brought downsides."

It does not seem coincidental that, in Charles's time line of history, things started to go downhill around the period when people began chopping off the heads of monarchs. Jonathan Healey, a professor of history at Oxford University and the author of "The Blazing World: A New History of Revolutionary England, 1603-1689," says that, in the tumultuous years of the early seventeenth century, when religious authority was being questioned, Charles I was also invested in the concept of harmony—which, as Healey points out, is another word for "order." "It hinges on everyone knowing their place," he explains. "The peasants don't question who is in charge, and they are happy. They are fed and they are looked after by the aristocracy, but they don't criticize them."

Unlike Charles I, Charles III has shown a passionate concern for members of society who lack opportunities for education or professional advancement. More than a million young people have received financial support from the Prince's Trust to, say, start a business or further their education. But believing that everyone deserves an equal opportunity to make the best of her life is not the same as believing that everyone can—or should—rise to the top. In “Harmony,” Charles suggests that the happiest, most just, and most sustainable framework for humans is built on traditional values of community, with individuals enjoying the satisfactions of labor and the consolations of nature within a sturdy social structure. He writes most glowingly of the sorts of rural communities that would have been common in the time of Charles I: sheep farmers who produce mutton, “a once commonly eaten meat that has a really delicious flavor and texture,” belong to a “harmonious pattern of existence and production that not only sustains many of the landscapes that help to define our identity and nurture our very souls, but also sustains entire communities of people.”

The kinds of pre-industrial societies that Charles admires were headed by a lord of the manor, who, in turn, deferred to a king. Although it might not be entirely fair to describe Charles as feudalism-curious, his world view does appear to incorporate an implicit defense of his monarchical position. As Charles seems to see it, a king should be a benign convener at the head of a natural hierarchy. “Studying the properties of harmony and understanding more clearly how it works at all levels of creation reveals a crucial, timeless principle: that no one part can grow well and true without it relating to—and being in accordance with—the well-being of the whole,” he writes in his book.

At a gathering a few years ago, Charles was introduced to Thomas Kaplan, an American businessman and the founder of Panthera, a nonprofit devoted to the preservation of lions, tigers, and other big cats. Kaplan says, “I realized I had a few minutes, max, to have his attention, and I put it to him very simply—I told him that you have to see cats as an umbrella species for vast

ecosystems. Cats need two things to thrive: they need land to roam, and they need food. If you have the flora and fauna to support the very top of the food chain, *by definition* you have a thriving ecosystem.” Several months later, Kaplan learned that Charles had essentially repeated his case on behalf of big cats while on a visit to government officials in South America. Kaplan was impressed: “It told me that, when he is touched by something, it registers, and that he has a remarkable capacity to apply it.” But it’s no surprise that Kaplan’s pitch would resonate with Charles. The lion is the king of the jungle. When the King is thriving, it follows that all is also well in his dominion.

While Charles struggled to find his individual purpose as Prince of Wales, he was obliged to carry out his dynastic purpose by producing an heir. His marriage to Diana, Princess of Wales, was no more a love match than was Charles I’s arranged union, in 1625, with Henrietta Maria, the fifteen-year-old youngest daughter of the late King of France. (In time, they grew closer, partly because of a mutual love of art. It can happen.) Diana had initially seemed to share at least some of Charles’s enthusiasms: she submitted with apparent contentment to his love of the outdoors, even allowing herself to be taught to fish. And she promptly produced two sons, William and Harry. But when the marriage was still young it became clear that she had no interest in Charles’s devotion to the gardens at Highgrove, and that she was bored by and resentful of the books he read and the friends he kept. Although Charles rekindled an affair with his old girlfriend Camilla Parker Bowles—“Do you seriously expect me to be the first Prince of Wales in history *not* to have a mistress?” he reportedly once said—he was pained by the catastrophic failure of a marriage that he imagined he could never escape. “How awful incompatibility is,” he wrote to a friend, five years after the wedding. “How dreadfully destructive it can be.”

The Prince and Princess of Wales separated in 1992 and were divorced in 1996; a year later, Diana died, in a car accident in Paris. In a sense, the

tragedy offered Charles a kind of liberation; as Catherine Mayer points out, Charles “appears to be sensitive to accusations that he benefited from Diana’s death, perhaps not least because on some level he may fear that is true.” His continued compatibility with Camilla was formalized by marriage in 2005, as the couple entered a late-in-life period of domestic fulfillment conducted across their multiple domiciles. By the mid-twenty-tens, it looked as if the future king was about as happy as a man apparently not congenitally disposed to happiness could be.

Lately, though, family affairs have become considerably less harmonious. There is the issue of Charles’s own wayward Younger Brother, Prince Andrew, whose grubby dealings with the late sex offender Jeffrey Epstein brought the Royal Family into disrepute even before Andrew settled a multimillion-dollar lawsuit with Virginia Giuffre, who alleged that she had been sexually assaulted by him when she was a teen-ager. (He has denied the charges.) Andrew is reportedly “bewildered” that King Charles has not yet shared any of his inheritance from the Queen—primogeniture is a bummer—and appalled by the possibility that he may have to move out of Royal Lodge, the thirty-room country house where he has lived, with his mother’s forbearance, for nearly two decades. Andrew is only sixty-three, which means that the British monarch, whether that be Charles or William after him, will likely be managing the Andrew problem for decades to come.

“Charles I in Three Positions,” by Van Dyck, hangs at Windsor Castle, where King Charles III spent much of his youth. Art work by Anthony Van Dyck / Courtesy Royal Collection Trust / © His Majesty King Charles III 2023

Then, there is Prince Harry, Duke of Sussex—that other troublesome Younger Brother. Harry’s de-facto abdication from the Royal Family for a royalties-underwritten life in California with his American wife, Meghan, Duchess of Sussex, has caused the King both private pain and institutional agita. “Spare,” Harry’s memoir, is too literary to sound much like Harry actually wrote it, but a woeful lament attributed to Charles—“Please, boys, don’t make my final years a misery”—sounds altogether authentic. It was a stroke of either Machiavellian genius or clerical obliviousness for the Palace to schedule the coronation so that it coincides with the fourth birthday of Prince Archie, Harry’s firstborn, thereby providing the perfect excuse for one or both Sussexes to skip the ceremonies in favor of sun-dappled festivities in

Montecito. It did not bode well when, in late March, Prince Harry made a brief surprise visit to the United Kingdom—in order to appear at the High Court in a case against Associated Newspapers, which owns the *Daily Mail*—and the King was said to be too “busy” to see him. In the end, Harry confirmed that he would attend the coronation, but without Meghan or their children.

When Charles I ascended to the throne, there remained the shadow cast by a charismatic, long-reigning female monarch, Queen Elizabeth I, who had died twenty-two years earlier; similarly, Charles III’s mother has set an unmatched example. It’s easy to forget now that Queen Elizabeth II’s popularity dipped substantially during periods of her reign. She was criticized in the nineteen-eighties and nineties, not least for her perceived responsibility for the failure of three of her four children’s marriages. All that, though, had become ancient history by the time she died. Charles I may be the only monarch ever to have been canonized in the Church of England—he is known by some High Anglicans as Charles the Martyr—but Queen Elizabeth II ended her reign enjoying the secular version of sainthood: near-universal acclaim.

Charles has never had polling numbers that approached his mother’s. He and Camilla were recently heckled by protesters while on an official visit to Colchester. Though there currently appears to be little appetite for overthrowing the monarchy, there are indications that, for younger Britons, the whole shebang is irrelevant. There are no glamorous teen-age or twentysomething royals for the TikTok generation to scroll through, and the publication of “Spare”—which notes that Charles didn’t hug Harry when Diana died—didn’t help the King’s personal standing. According to one recent poll, only a third of eighteen-to-twenty-four-year-old Britons want the monarchy to continue.

The new Prince and Princess of Wales, William and Kate, are popular, but

they are now in their forties. Some people who know the King say that, despite the inevitable brevity of his own reign, he will not be heavy-handed in directing William. Paddy Harverson, the King's former communications secretary, says, "I would expect him very confidently to allow William to define his own role, as indeed Charles himself was." Charles has expressed satisfaction that William has taken up protection of the environment as a cause by launching the Earthshot Prize, to encourage sustainable technologies. Before the publication of "Spare," Charles also praised Harry's commitment to green causes, in Africa in particular. Given that Charles is an advocate for the controversial idea of population control—in "Harmony," he writes that "perhaps the time has come . . . to think very carefully how large our families should be"—he has surely been pleased by Harry and Meghan's publicly stated choice to limit their number of offspring to two.

Charles is more popular than he once was, in part because he was once so very unpopular—but also because the institution of the monarchy has a quasi-magical power. The percentage of people who thought that Charles would make a good king nearly doubled upon the death of Queen Elizabeth. Becoming king is transformational; being crowned king will likely be even more so. "He becomes essentially a new person," Hugo Vickers, the author of "Coronation: The Crowning of Elizabeth II," says. "They go into Westminster Abbey as one person, in a sense, and come out another."

All the same, Charles remains the familiar figure he has been for decades; wearing the crown will not alter his fundamental character. When, in the days after the Queen's death, he took part in ceremonies establishing his kingship, he got into not one but two altercations with malfunctioning pens, and his irascible response the second time—"I can't bear this bloody thing, what they do . . . every stinking time"—was recognizable to anyone who has spent time observing him. As his biographer Catherine Mayer puts it, "The world is against him—even *inanimate* objects are against him. That is absolutely central to his personality." Although it's impossible to imagine that King Charles will leave his heartfelt opinions at the door, it is similarly

unimaginable that he would precipitate a constitutional crisis by refusing to grant royal assent to the government's legislation, as his fictionalized stand-in did in "King Charles III," Mike Bartlett's celebrated blank-verse play, from 2014. This past October, the U.K. government let it be known that it would prefer the King not to attend the COP27 climate conference, in Egypt, even though he had attended COP26, in Scotland, in 2021. Charles complied. But, a few days before the conference, he convened two hundred politicians and activists for a reception at Buckingham Palace—a regal act of climate-change pre-gaming. "He must find it very difficult to shut up," Ian Skelly says. "Being King doesn't stop him caring. I think what we'll see in the future is an expression of that care, but in a different way."

The King's coronation will be a more modest affair than that of his mother, in keeping with his stated desire for a "slimmed down" monarchy. But, as always with matters related to the monarchy, "slimmed down" is a relative term. Whereas more than eight thousand guests attended the late Queen's coronation, a mere two thousand will be invited to Westminster Abbey this time, with peers of the realm reportedly obliged to draw lots for seats, and other dignitaries jostling for invitations. Prince William will have a ceremonial role, as will Prince George, the nine-year-old heir to the heir, who—being exactly the age that Charles was when he acknowledged the "awful truth" of his monarchical fate—will surely experience his own moment of reckoning.

Charles will subtly put his stamp on the coronation. The Palace has said that he will be anointed with animal-cruelty-free oil—it will contain no products from civet cats or sperm whales. The formulation, which will include essences of jasmine, orange blossom, and neroli, will incorporate oil made from olives grown in Jerusalem, not far from the burial place of Charles's paternal grandmother, Princess Alice. Charles has commissioned a new anthem from Andrew Lloyd Webber, adapted from the Nature-personifying words of Psalm 98: "Let the rivers clap their hands; let the hills be joyful

together before the Lord.” In a harmonious confluence, restoration work conducted in Westminster Abbey a decade ago will allow spectators and television viewers to see the Cosmati Pavement—a thirteenth-century mosaic floor, in front of the high altar, upon which part of the ceremony is performed. For the late Queen’s coronation, and for many generations before, the mosaic was covered with carpeting. The pavement, an intricate pattern of circles and squares, is understood by scholars to represent the interdependence of Heaven and earth. During the ceremony, the throne will be placed at the center of the pavement, symbolizing the relationship between the monarch and God. “It’s a representation of his role—he is bringing Heaven and earth together,” Azzam, of the Prince’s Foundation School of Traditional Arts, says. “He’s standing on the geometry that he has been teaching all his life, and he’s fulfilling his role as king.” In light of Charles’s mystical proclivities, he’s bound to find the symbolism meaningful. If he once regarded his future role as monarch as an unsought fate, Charles III will surely be inspired by the confirmation that, even within the prosaic limits of a constitutional monarchy, there’s a divinity that has shaped his end.

By the conclusion of the ceremony, Charles will have been equipped with glittering royal regalia: the Sovereign’s Sceptre, which symbolizes the temporal power of the monarch; the Sovereign’s Orb, which symbolizes that the monarch’s power is derived from God; and St. Edward’s Crown. The regalia are modelled on objects used since medieval times, but were in fact manufactured in 1661. They were commissioned by Charles II for his own spectacular coronation—the celebration of the monarchy’s restoration after what became known retrospectively as the Interregnum. The medieval originals had been melted down in the first flush of republican victory following the execution of Charles I, when it was thought that they wouldn’t be needed anymore.

After Charles III began studying art and came to appreciate the glories of the Royal Collection that had surrounded him as a child, he surely would have been struck by the remarkable portrait of Charles II, his second

eponym, painted by John Michael Wright in the sixteen-seventies. It shows the King seated on a throne, his feet in high-heeled shoes balanced on a cushion, and his shapely, spread legs adorned in white hose. He is dressed in the Order of the Garter costume: voluminous cloth-of-silver breeches and a shirt lavishly decorated with lace, on top of which he wears red Parliamentary robes edged with ermine. Charles II—who dispelled the austerity of the Puritans by revitalizing the arts, had more mistresses than anyone could keep track of, and granted a royal charter that helped set the transatlantic slave trade in motion—appears as the picture of monarchical authority, orb in one hand and scepter in the other. The portrait offers none of the suggestive ambivalence of “Charles I in Three Positions” which so captured the young Prince Charles’s attention when he saw it on the wall at Windsor Castle. What the portrait does offer is an illustration of the monarchy’s remarkable capacity for regeneration, for good or for ill—a capacity that King Charles III will have new occasion to ponder, now that his own head finally bears the weight of the crown. ♦

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