

BOOK REVIEW

Stephen Greenblatt, *Tyrant: Shakespeare on Politics*. W.W. Norton & Company, 2018, pp.224.

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Stephen Greenblatt's illustrious career as a Shakespearean critic and proponent of new historicism has notched another high point with his *Tyrant: Shakespeare on Politics*. In his skillfully and gracefully written book on Shakespeare's tyrants, Greenblatt attempts an exposition on contemporary politics. *Tyrant* is the result of his anxiety "about the possible outcome of an upcoming election" results that validated his worst fears. Therefore, chiefly, the book is about Donald Trump, the current American President, and how Shakespeare might have dealt with Trump's politics. Greenblatt deals with the following questions: "How does a truly disastrous leader—a sociopath, a demagogue, a tyrant—comes to power? How and why, does a tyrant hold on to power? And what goes on in the hidden recesses of the tyrant's soul?" Shakespeare investigates different attributes of tyrants, their paths to power of the tyrants, part played by enablers and resistances. The book is an illuminating examination of present political situation and the features of Shakespearean tyrants and its "enablers." Shakespeare could not outwardly express political criticisms for it was considered treason in his age. Therefore, he expressed what he intended to say ingeniously through his plays and escaped the prison. The genius playwright was able to accommodate themes of politics that are delicate and sensitive in order to challenge tyranny.

Greenblatt examines Macbeth, Richard III, Lear, Coriolanus and Leontes displaying egotism, impetuosity, impropriety and ineptitude. These "unscrupulous leaders have no interest in improving the lives of the poor and proclaim their longing for the pristine past before weaklings led it astray." His expertise on Renaissance Drama comes to fore in his astute reading of Shakespearean plays from a political perspective. However, some of the connections he makes to tyranny are compelled because not every play he chooses for exposition is about tyrants or tyranny. For instance, *Coriolanus* is a play that deals with treachery, a soldier's sense of duty and

turmoil in a state rather than tyranny. He observes: “It is as if the leader of a political party long identified with hatred of Russia—forever saber-rattling and accusing the rival politicians of treason—should secretly make his way to Moscow and offer his services to the Kremlin.” Coriolanus is not a callous warrior but an outspoken warrior who in no way makes a comparison with Vladimir Putin.

Underlining the subtitles of Henry plays like “The Witch Must Burn” and “Heads on Spikes,” Greenblatt exposes the nuances of governmentality. Macbeth and Richard III, the proper tyrants in Shakespeare’s plays get less considerate treatment than other kingly figures. Macbeth’s changeover from a loyal servant to murderer is not only political progress but also a psychological development. Greenblatt’s portrayal of Macbeth as tyrant is not as effective as Richard III. Apart from being a killer of children, his murders have valid political and psychological selfish reasons. Richard III is a person with “limitless self-regard, the law-breaking, the pleasure in inflicting pain, the compulsive desire to dominate” “pathologically narcissistic and supremely arrogant” bullying personality demanding absolute loyalty but inept of gratitude. His firm volley of falsehoods work its way to marginalize the skeptics, instill perplexity, shun protests and finds its contemporary equivalence in Trump. His overwhelming soliloquy: “like one lost in a thorny wood, / That rents the thorns and is rent with the thorns, / Seeking a way and straying from the way, / Not knowing how to find the open air.” (III Henry VI 3.2. 190-3) is a reflection of his psychic state rather than political observation. *Henry VI* and *Richard III* era was much bloodier than contemporary political scenario but it exposes how sectarian feuds disable governments, deceive on common goodness and consolidate factions into “mortal enemies.” However, it is hard to find these figures as Trump’s counterparts because Trump is more a stabile personality. Greenblatt also effectively examines how a tyrant is supported by his aids and the manner in which a tyrant enables his end. The self-deceiving tricksters and schemers are attracted to varied dynamics of power in order to enable dispensing domination in uncanny ways. Cade’s “let’s kill all the lawyers” is well received even today.

Greenblatt raises poignant questions: “Under what circumstances, Shakespeare asked himself, do cherished institutions, seemingly deep-rooted and impregnable, prove fragile? Why do large numbers of people knowingly accept being lied to? How does a figure like Richard III

or Macbeth ascend to the throne?” These questions remain largely unanswered or connected to present day politics. Greenblatt does not explain what tyranny is and how his (underlying) definition of tyranny could find its relevance in contemporary polity. What makes Greenblatt’s attempt quite intricate and loosely knit is his reading of the tyrants from the perspective of Donald Trump. Rather than contextualizing Renaissance governmentality and politics, Greenblatt forcefully sees a Trump in every Shakespearean kingly figure he has chosen for exposition. At many instances, Greenblatt’s political apprehensions outweigh a much-needed keen critical connection with the merit of illustrations he has chosen. Optimistically, Greenblatt locates his hope on the servant in *King Lear*, who dies defending Gloucester after being tortured by Duke of Cornwall. The best defense against tyranny is “the sheer unpredictability of collective life, its refusal to march in lockstep to any one person’s orders.”

