

**Greenblatt, Stephen.** *Tyrant: Shakespeare on Power*. Penguin Random House, 2018. 212 pages.

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The early modern era (late fifteenth century to late eighteenth century) has been classified in historiography as the age of absolute monarchs and tyrants (see Tuck). The stage has always invested in debating political thought in a mediated way through figures like Julius Caesar, Macbeth, and King Lear. Stephen Greenblatt's *Tyrant: Shakespeare on Power* examines the psychopolitical mechanisms leading to the rise of tyrants in seven plays by William Shakespeare. Greenblatt is a renowned Shakespeare scholar who holds the John Cogan University Professorship of Humanities at Harvard University and is the founder of the new historicist approach to literary texts. In *Tyrant*, he examines seven plays by Shakespeare, namely the *King Henry VI* trilogy, *Richard III*, *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, *The Winter's Tale*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Coriolanus*. The ten chapters that the volume comprises are short and interpretive *à la* new historicism.

Unlike Ben Jonson, who got imprisoned after performing *The Isle of Dogs*, Shakespeare knew how to criticize contemporary politics without being subject to any kind of sanction, except for the example of the famous performance of *Richard II* that inspired Robert Devereux's "late innovation" (*Ham.* II. 2., 326), which Greenblatt often quotes.<sup>1</sup> He undertakes the same approach, i.e. new historicism, in his analysis of the play, thus denying its demise or, at least, its 'calcification', as it has been claimed.<sup>2</sup> The author prefaces the book with the question "how is it possible for a whole country to fall into the hands of a tyrant" (1), therefore evoking Buchanan's radical political philosophy of the state when he underscores that a "king rules over willing subjects... a tyrant over unwilling" (1).<sup>3</sup> Arguing that tyranny is a collective responsibility, Greenblatt remarks that all "must bear some responsibility, even those who merely remain silent and imagine that they therefore free from blame... By multiple acts of this kind, taken by respectable people eager to be 'guiltless from the meaning', tyranny is enabled" (75-76). The author's last argument permeates the whole book, which is

structured according to two parallels. First, Greenblatt brings to the light the ruler versus subject prism; then, he similarly addresses the psychological versus the political play.

In the first chapter, “Oblique Angles,” the author sets the tone for the entire volume by posing the aforementioned prefatory question that was accurate in Shakespeare’s age and remains so: “How is it possible for a whole country to fall into the hands of a tyrant?” (1). Although the book leaves this question unanswered, and despite the new historicist approach that Greenblatt undertakes, sociological and anthropological studies may provide the answer/s. This chapter briefly addresses a number of oblique angles through which Shakespeare tackled political issues to evade censorship.

In the second chapter, “Party Politics,” Greenblatt examines the *King Henry VI* trilogy, addressing ways that make societies fall to the tight grip of a despot, including, by way of example, weakness at the centre of this realm, including the existence of political factions that can lead to disorder, civil wars, or *coup d’états*. In the same regard, the third chapter, “Fraudulent Populism”, unsurprisingly alluding to Trump, discusses populism as a form of cynical exploitation (35).

The next three chapters —“A matter of Character”, “Enablers”, and “Tyranny Triumphant”— provide a reading of *Richard III* from three different perspectives. Greenblatt shows how Richard III’s inward/psychological world interferes in the political arena, thus making him a tyrant. The internalized disgust by Richard II is reflected in the political and moral horror that he inflicts (57). After examining the psychopathology of tyrants, Greenblatt turns to what *enables* tyranny, that is, subjects, calling them “enablers” (66). In this regard, the audience becomes complicit in and responsible for enabling tyrants to exist:

Within the play, Richard’s rise is made possible by various degrees of complicity from those around him. But in the theatre, it is we, the audience, watching it all happening, who are lured into a peculiar form of collaboration. We are charmed again and again by the villain’s outrageousness, by his indifference to the

ordinary norms of human decency, by lies that seem to be effective even though no one believes them. (81-82)

In “Tyranny Triumphant”, Greenblatt examines the horror that follows a tyrant’s rise to power, arguing that the skills that enabled Richard III to become one are not sufficient for the preservation of the state.

The seventh chapter, “The Instigator”, examines what the author calls the “twisted self” through *Macbeth*, where internalized sexual anxieties become the real force behind tyranny. In the author’s view, the element that often separates rulers or tyrants from subjects is the madness of the former. In the eighth chapter, “Madness in Greatness,” King Lear and Leontes in *The Winter’s Tale* become the embodiment of the ruler who is drawn towards tyranny by emotional instability (113).

The last two chapters, “Downfall and Resurgence” and “Resistible Rise”, present the readers with the downfall of tyrants and the horror and disorder that they leave behind as well as the possible yet “resistible” rise of societies against tyranny, which provides a somewhat positive ending, similar to that in *The Winter’s Tale*. Finally, in “Coda”, Greenblatt reflects on Shakespeare’s theatrical and dramatic career, as well as his nuanced and relativist criticism of subjects.

In his analysis of these seven plays by Shakespeare, Greenblatt focuses on the dualism “tyrant versus subjects” while implicitly criticizing twenty-first century politics by blaming the people’s complicity and (purposeful) collaboration in enabling political tyranny in its modern sense, including populism and post-truth politics. In this sense, he claims that “Caesar is dead... but Caesarism is triumphant” (154), thus summing up the complicated mechanism underlying tyranny in Shakespeare’s world. Tyranny could be very prevalent in our contemporary societies, particularly after the rise of the extreme right around the globe, which the author links to Shakespeare’s plays when he states that they “probe the psychological mechanisms that lead a nation to abandon its ideals and even its self-interest” (1-2). Although Greenblatt is ‘cautious’ not to discuss

twenty-first century politics, he implicitly hints at the readers' complicity in the corrupt world of politics by concluding with a rhetorical question, namely "What is the city but the people?" (189). The conclusion aligns itself with Buchanan's political philosophy, with which the author chooses to open his book, remarking that the people and the law are one and the same thing:

B.—Is not... the voice of the people and of the law the same?

M.—The same.

B.—Which is the more powerful, the people or the law?

M.—The whole people, I imagine. (67)

Greenblatt recognizes, via Shakespeare, an implicit sense of political interest by engaging the reader in the tyranny of modern politics and societies.

Given its interpretative and not overly 'academic' tone, the book may be read outside the scholarly circle of Shakespearean researchers, thus allowing Shakespeare to face a world full of populism, corruption, and post-truth politics, where tyranny still persists. In so doing, Shakespeare's audience becomes engaged in the ethical task of reading. It is no longer the tyranny of one ruler over his subjects, but that of fake news, social media, and world corporations controlling the masses. The power of this volume lies in its capacity to make Shakespeare face the contemporary world with its horror and immorality. Greenblatt manages to make Shakespeare speak again—*Shakespeare loquentem*.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The term 'innovation' in *Hamlet* most likely refers to the Essex Rebellion taking place after the performance of *Richard II*.

<sup>2</sup> The demise of new historicism has been widely discussed. Veiser (2), for instance, compares historicism to the "flayed, crucified, disemboweled body" of Christ.

<sup>3</sup> George Buchanan is a sixteenth-century political philosopher who became known for his espousal of the radical politico-

philosophical views on the state and sovereignty and resistance theory. He became associated with tyrannicide and assassination after publishing his volume *De Jure Regni Apud Scotos; A Dialogue Concerning the Rights of the Crown in Scotland*, in which he justifies resistance against tyrants and denounces the contemporary theories of reason of state. Among his most radical views is that a king should be a subject of the law and should, therefore, stand in front of a judge after committing an error. The latter aligns with Devereux's famous saying "What, cannot princes err? Cannot subjects receive wrong...When the principle of honour collided with those of an unconditional submission to a political authority, which prevailed?" (in Shapiro 59).

### Works Cited

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