



Stephen Greenblatt, *Tyrant. Shakespeare on Power*

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by Simona Laghi

In recent years the interrelationship between Shakespearean plays and the political turmoil of early modern England has been one of the most absorbing questions for academic study. Scholars have investigated this field of research from different perspectives and many works on the subject are available today. However, a new book by Greenblatt is always an event. What more will the founder of the new historicism have to tell us on the “*energia*” spread by Shakespeare’s plays? This book does satisfy our curiosity because Greenblatt, drawing the reader’s attention to this “dynamic exchange” occurring between theatre and early modern society, evidences the meaningfulness of Shakespeare in relation our own contemporaneity in a more urgent way.¹

At the basis of this work is an article that appeared in *The New York Times* shortly before the American election, entitled “Shakespeare explains the 2016 election.” Here, taking Richard III as his example, Greenblatt shows that through him Shakespeare tells a disturbing truth: tyrants achieve power thanks to dumb, and to a great extent, unintentional and unconscious enablers. This means, Greenblatt points out, that it is up to citizens to use properly and discerningly votes, the only legal instruments to save us from silence and to safeguard democracy. This central concept is extended and deepened in this book, which is an investigation into how Shakespeare, in representing the rise and fall of tyranny, showed and exemplified the mechanisms at the basis of

¹ About the concepts of “*energia*” and “dynamic exchange” see Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiation*, 6-7.



authoritarian forms of government. Not only does the author present a more detailed analysis of *Richard III*, but he also shines a light on the multifaceted other figures of tyrants that inhabit Shakespeare's plays. The observation involves common people too, because, although they seem to occupy the background of the historical scenario, they actually have substantial responsibility for the rise and fall of a despot.

The book is divided into ten chapters. The first paves the way for an analysis of ten plays, chosen from those regarding English history, the tragedies, and the Roman plays. In the first chapter, significantly entitled "Oblique Angle," Greenblatt points out that Shakespeare was particularly attracted by the questions interwoven with power, mostly the underlying causes that enable someone who is manifestly unfit to rule peacefully to reach the pinnacle of power. He believes that the playwright conceived his plays starting from a simple question: "how is it possible for a whole country to fall into the hands of a tyrant?" (1). As it emerges from his plays, Shakespeare gives evidence that tyranny is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that spreads thanks to the coexistence of manifold circumstances as well as to "widespread complicity" (1).

In the absence of freedom of expression and the basic rules of democracy, the playwright was able to show on stage questions that were closely bound up with the turmoil that was enflaming early modern England without being persecuted by the censors, who could count on a fine net of the monarch's spies. Considering this, Greenblatt interestingly explains that this freedom in expressing such risky issues was due to the strategy of "historical distance" (3). This consisted in representing the crucial political questions, such as that concerning the tyrannicide debate at the end of Elizabeth I's reign, by setting them in a distant past. However, not only was the displacement to a distant time a precautionary strategy to avoid colliding with the strict censorship restrictions, but also a method of analysis since looking at the present from a "historical distance" involved a comparative reflection on the present through the lens of the past and this made clear what was unclear. Greenblatt particularly notes that Shakespeare "seems to have grasped that he thought more clearly about the issues that preoccupied his world when he confronted them not directly but from an oblique angle" (3). Moreover, the historical distance associated with fiction left him free to express his ideas and to show what was not yet evident to the audience: "Things that had been maddeningly unclear came into sharp focus, and he did not need to remain silent about what he perceived" (4).

In the following chapters Greenblatt highlights the different forms of tyranny represented by Shakespeare. In *Henry VI* the vacuum of power and the weakness of the state are depicted as the main causes of tyranny because they make society "ripe for a despot" (24). Considering the landed classes' contempt for democracy and their disregard of the lower classes, the playwright deepens this question in the second part of *Henry VI* where the focus is on the misleadingness of populism: it "may look like an embrace of the have-nots but in reality, it is a form of cynical exploitation. The unscrupulous leader has no actual interest in bettering the lot of the poor" (35). Hence, it is easy to infer from the play that Jack Cade is only a means of steering the emotions of the mob and of leading the country into a lawless chaos that York aims at exploiting to put "the golden circuit" on his head (36).

The three central chapters are focused on Richard III, who is seen as a development of the tyrannical figures that had already been investigated in the trilogy



of *Henry VI*. Interestingly, the author highlights Shakespeare's subtle depiction of this tyrant, focusing on his physical and psychological features so as to underline how they have combined to forge his character. His unappealing body, signally the twisted spine, represents externally his inner wickedness in accordance with the early modern belief, but the playwright insists on the fact that the reaction of society to this deformity "is the root condition of his psychopathology" (57). Hence, according to Greenblatt, the question that fascinates Shakespeare was why a person, whom everybody knew to be unscrupulous, cynical, disrespectful of the law and visually embodied a monstrous inner nature, was able to ascend to the throne of England. From the play it emerges that the reason lies in the fact that he was surrounded by enablers, people aware of the fact that he had all the features of a villain, but, despite this, they facilitated his rise. Many figures of enablers can be found in *Richard III*: those who are frightened by his violence; those who do not understand that "Richard is as bad as he seems to be" (67), those who believe that his power is under control, those who believe they can take advantage of the situation, those who simply do not care and, in order to avoid trouble, do not make any kind of opposition. All of them support directly or indirectly Richard's accession to the throne, and only too late realize they are completely under his arbitrary power. What is interesting is Shakespeare's emphasis on Richard III's political campaign to "solicit a popular mandate" (76) and the centrality of the scene of the election. As a matter of fact, the tyrant wants his accession as a consequence of the popular consent, not of violence, and the citizens, instead of opposing, in the end support him (79).

In chapter seven the figure of Macbeth, one of the most striking in Shakespeare's theatre, is compared to that of Richard III. Macbeth's tyranny does not spring from the suffering due to a deformed body or a lonely childhood as in the case of Richard III, but from the instigation of his wife and his concern to satisfy her insane will. Moreover, this pressure leads him to increasing mental instability, a disease that Shakespeare seems to consider as a constant feature in despotic leaders (107). This question is investigated in depth in *King Lear*, who, according to Greenblatt, is an example of how a lawful king can behave like a tyrant because of his madness. As a matter of fact, Lear, having ruled without any consideration of the law and any kind of contradiction from the members of his court, is driven mad by his daughters' disrespect. He is unable to accept his new status as a dethroned king and his tyrannical nature spreads more strongly than before until the irremediable loss of his beloved daughter when he comes to understand his errors. Leontes in *The Winter's Tale* is depicted as another case of how madness leads to tyranny but, unlike Lear, this king has a second chance at the end of the play and can mend his original error of having rejected Hermione on baseless accusations. However, Greenblatt acutely notes that Shakespeare with the scene of the statue and Leontes's redemption seems to suggest that a tyrant's repentance is implausible because "Imagining this inner transformation is almost as difficult as imagining a statue coming to life" (136).

The last chapter is devoted to two Roman plays, *Julius Caesar* and *Coriolanus*. The former is the only example in which tyranny is stopped before it can begin. The mob has a significant role because, right from the first act it is represented as a force able to influence politics. This is shown by the scene in which the tribunes Murellus and Flavius, hoping to cool the enthusiasm of the citizens in favour of Caesar, divest the leader's statues of their decorations. Only after Caesar's death do the "volatility of the mass of



ordinary Romans" (154), as well as the cynicism of the senators, show that the murder plot, instead of safeguarding the Roman Republic, has put an end to it: "Caesar is dead, but by the end of the play Caesarism is triumphant" (154). In analysing *Coriolanus* Greenblatt points out the close interrelation between early modern England and the play, which "obliquely addresses immediate and pressing concerns" (156). The food riots that broke out in 1607, the protests against the enclosure of the lands, the habit of hoarding grain in order to raise the price, are all questions brought to the fore in this play set in the first years of the Roman Republic but concerning events that interested the early modern audience. Coriolanus is an example of how a noble brave soldier and a promising leader can become a threat to Rome. His most disruptive fault consists in disregarding the citizenry, the customs and the law that are the basis of the new form of government: the republic. Greenblatt concludes his analysis by pointing out that, although Shakespeare lived in a society that ignored democratic principles, he interestingly perceived that tyranny can be defeated in the end by citizens' opposition. He seems to believe in "a popular spirit of humanity that could be suppressed but never completely extinguished" (189), a comforting belief encapsulated in the striking observation by the tribune Sicinius: "What is the city if not the people?" (189).

In conclusion, in this book Greenblatt adopts the same strategy as that used by the playwright: he investigates the present from an oblique angle. Explaining how Shakespeare revealed the mechanisms underlying tyranny and power, he clarifies some crucial questions that affect our contemporaneity. In particular, he draws attention to the need for an active and conscious participation of people in the realization of democracy. Convincingly argued and attractively written, as well as providing deep insights into some of the most famous plays, the book appears to be addressed not only to academics but also to a wider readership interested in reflecting on politics and power looking at them from an oblique angle.

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