'Tyrant' by Stephen Greenblatt: Shakespeare's ideas on tyranny and resistance

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by Glenn C. Altschuler, For The Inquirer

Tyrant
Shakespeare on Politics
By Stephen Greenblatt
W.W. Norton. 212 pp. $21.95

Reviewed by Glenn C. Altschuler

When the presidential election of 2016 confirmed his “worst fears,” Stephen Greenblatt, a professor of the humanities at Harvard University and the author of Will in the World, Shakespeare’s Freedom, Swerve, and The Rise and Fall of Adam and Eve, decided to “do something” by writing something.

In Tyrant, Greenblatt analyzes the characteristics and paths to power of the archvillains in Shakespeare’s history plays, and the roles of enablers and resisters. Through Shakespeare, he suggests, we can become more aware of our own circumstances.

In Elizabethan England, Greenblatt indicates, criticism of the sovereign constituted an act of treason. And so Shakespeare set none of his plays in contemporary England and rarely referred to current events. Nonetheless, the Bard, “a master of displacement” and indirection, “found a way to say what he wanted to say” about politics and the devastation visited on societies ruled by tyrants.

Unlike Shakespeare, Greenblatt does not choose a strategy of indirection. The allusions to Donald Trump throughout Tyrant are impossible to miss. Populism, Greenblatt writes, is “in reality a form of cynical exploitation.” Jack Cade, Henry VI’s demagogic “master of voodoo economics,” promises the people “he will make America great again.” Richard III is “pathologically narcissistic and supremely arrogant.” His triumph is based on “lies and fraudulent promises.” He exhibits no interest in uniting or governing his country. During his reign as king, Greenblatt indicates, Macbeth can expect little more than “the mouth honor” of sycophants. The “monstrously self-absorbed” King Lear does not “traffic in facts.” He expects “immediate, unreserved confirmation of his views and a willingness to carry out his orders.
without hesitation.” And the plot twist in Coriolanus reminds Greenblatt of “the leader of a political party long identified with hatred of Russia” secretly offering his services to the Kremlin.

As they join Greenblatt in venting their spleens, the Never Trump readers of Tyrant may be puzzled by his discussion of how tyrannical regimes end. Once a tyrant controls the state, Greenblatt suggests, “there is almost nothing the ordinary mechanisms of moderation can accomplish.” Imagining a tyrant’s sincere repentance, as Shakespeare did in The Winter’s Tale, Greenblatt claims, is almost as difficult as imagining a statue coming to life.

But he also reads into the record Shakespeare’s view that tyrants do not last long. Incompetent, isolated, suspicious, angry, and overconfident, Shakespeare implied, they cannot gain support from the masses, crush all their opponents, or overcome the “sheer unpredictability of collective life.”

That said, Tyrant leaves you wondering whether Shakespeare (who also thought most people “easily manipulated by slogans, cowed by threats, or bribed by trivial gifts”) – or, for that matter, Greenblatt – really has all that much “faith in the political action of ordinary citizens.”

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