



# Tyrant: Shakespeare on Power

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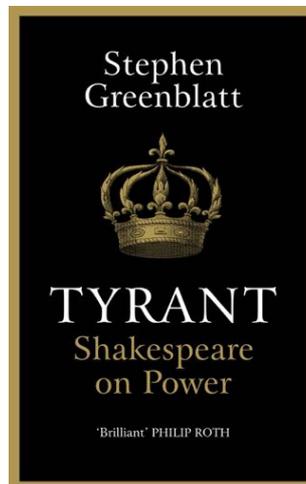
**W**HY does a nation abandon its ideals and even its self-interest and allow itself to be drawn to a demagogue manifestly unsuited to govern, dangerously impulsive, cruel, conniving and indifferent to the truth? It's a highly topical question and the stated aim of Stephen Greenblatt at the beginning of *Tyranny: Shakespeare on Power* (Bodley Head). He doesn't really provide a satisfactory answer apart from the obvious one. The age of Shakespeare and the centuries before him were far from being democratic. People had no choice in the matter. Even to criticise a monarch would be dangerous, for there was no freedom of speech. Laws passed in Henry VIII's reign made it treason to refer to the ruler as a tyrant.

The 1597 performance of a satirical play called *The Isle of Dogs* – deemed to be seditious and full of 'slandereous matter' – led to the arrest and imprisonment of Ben Jonson, one of its authors. We don't know what so offended the authorities – one theory is that it labelled the queen's Privy Council as her lapdogs (the Isle of Dogs may be so-named because Edward III kennelled his greyhounds there). An order then went out for the closure of all London theatres for two months as a punishment and an example of what would await any future displays of "slandereous" material.

Clearly, as Greenblatt says, a dramatist took his life in his hands if he reflected critically on contemporary politics. What he doesn't explain is the curious fact that, whereas up to 1597 all the plays had been published anonymously, the very next year the name 'W. Shakespere' appeared on the title page of *Love's labour's Lost*, the first use of the name in a published play. Surely it was now even more necessary to maintain anonymity? Or was it? In a climate of Catholic terrorism and artistic repression, anonymity actually attracts attention. Authorities will be keen to know who is hiding behind the mask. But suppose the stated name is that of a nonentity who is not known as a writer. Then the authorities may decide that pursuing him is not worth the fuss, especially as he is not likely to influence anybody of any importance. Could 'Shakespeare' be a mask name?

Another factor is that the subject matter of the plays was never contemporary, at least on the surface. As Greenblatt says, the author carefully kept at least a full century between himself and the events he depicted. Through historical distance or the artifice of fiction, he could be ruthlessly honest. By using oblique angles he could hold a mirror up to the nature of his own times.

There was only one notable exception to this lifelong strategy of indirection. *Henry V*, first written in 1599, depicts the military success, almost two centuries earlier, of an English army that had invaded France. Near the end, the chorus



invites the audience to imagine the glorious reception the victorious king received when he returned home. Then it conjures up a comparable scene it hopes to witness soon:

*Were now the General of our gracious Empress,  
As in good time he may, from Ireland coming,  
Bringing rebellion broached on his sword,  
How many would the peaceful city quit  
To welcome him!*

The 'General' in question was the Earl of Essex, who was at that time leading English forces against Hugh O'Neill, Earl of Tyrone. But Essex made a truce with O'Neill and, against the Queen's orders, returned home. He then staged a failed coup, was arrested, tried and executed on 25th February 1601.

His close friend Southampton, also an intimate friend of 'Shakespeare' and Francis Bacon, was sentenced to the same fate but his sentence was commuted to life imprisonment. Yet again 'Shakespeare' was left alone, which is puzzling especially in view of his friendship with Southampton and the fact that the day before the attempted coup a number of Essex's supporters, led by his steward Sir Gelly Meyrick, commissioned the Globe Theatre to put on a performance of *Richard II*, which is about the deposing and killing of that king. The clear intention was to incite the London crowd by showing that a coup d'état could succeed. The parallel between Richard and Elizabeth was drawn by the Queen herself who later told William Lambarde, Keeper of the Rolls, that "I am Richard II, know ye not that?" And, she added, "this tragedy was played forty times in open streets and houses". Yet she and her government chose not to punish the players or the dramatist. Strange indeed.

Greenblatt then turns his attention to the three parts of *Henry VI* and suggests that in the depiction of the Houses of York and Lancaster we are invited to "watch the invention of political parties and the transformation of aristocratic rivals into political enemies". In the Duke of York he sees an exemplary populist who broods to himself: "I will stir up in England some black storm". He finds the perfect person to be his agent: "I have seduced a headstrong Kentishman, John Cade". York will use him to stir up the grievances of the ragged mob and cause a rebellion which he will then exploit to advance his own interests. Cade himself "promises to make England great again. How will he do that? He shows the crowd at once: he will attack education. The educated elite has betrayed the people". Sounds familiar? He tells Lord Saye, the treasurer, that "I am the besom (broom) that must sweep the court clean of such filth as thou art". Echoes of a recent promise to 'drain the swamp', perhaps?

It doesn't turn out the way Cade or York planned. The rebellion failed and Cade was killed in 1450. York himself was killed at the Battle of Wakefield in 1460. His son, however, did ascend the throne, if briefly from 1483-85, —>

as Richard III, after declaring his 12-year-old nephew Edward illegitimate (and possibly having him and his brother killed). In this chapter and the next Greenblatt pulls no punches in fitting his analysis into contemporary events. It is clear, if it wasn't already, that he is writing not just about a 15th century tyrant but also that he is a proxy for the current inhabitant of the White House. Richard has limitless self-regard, a pleasure in inflicting pain and a compulsive desire to dominate. He is pathologically narcissistic and supremely arrogant. He has a gross sense of entitlement, never doubting that he can do whatever he chooses. He expects absolute loyalty, but he is incapable of gratitude. The feelings of others mean nothing to him. He has no natural grace, no sense of shared humanity, no decency. He is a bully and dominates and despises women. It is a one-sided view of the man who is depicted by the dramatist as also having some admirable qualities. But Greenblatt is not really describing Richard III but rather the character of Donald Trump as he sees him. Let us hope that, like Richard III, he too is brought down.

The chapter entitled 'Enablers' gets closest to explaining the success of a tyrant. First, a few people are genuinely fooled, believing in his pledges and taking at face value his displays of emotion. Fear is an obvious factor too. "I'll make a corpse of him that disobeys" (*Richard III*, 1.2.37). Then there are those who cannot keep in focus that he is as bad as he seems. Another group thinks that things will continue normally because he is restricted by others around him. A more sinister group think that they can take advantage of the tide of evil and seize something along the way for themselves. The tyrant will always find willing executioners who would, in Hamlet's phrase, "make love to this appointment" (*Hamlet* 5.2.57).

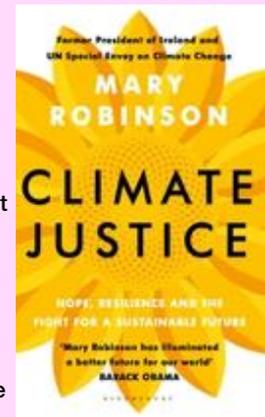
In his chapter on *Macbeth*, Greenblatt demonstrates that psychopathic tyrants lose friends, become lonely and paranoid and develop an emptiness at the centre of their being. Macbeth is actually the classic example of Francis Bacon's analysis in his essay *Of Great Place*: "it is a strange desire to seek power and lose liberty; or to seek power over others, and to lose power over a man's self".

Richard III and Macbeth are criminals who come to power by killing the legitimate rulers who stand in their way. Both are ultimately removed by force. Greenblatt doesn't mention that James I wrote a treatise on the *True Law of Free Monarchies* (1598) in which he outlined the theory of the divine right of kings, arguing that only God could remove a monarch. But what if the king is a child killer like Richard III or a paranoid mass murderer like Macbeth? Is it not right, the author suggests, that they are forcibly deposed? That in *Macbeth* the dramatist is specifically responding to James's treatise is clear from the fact that it is the *Scottish* play, probably first performed in 1606, and includes Banquo, believed to be the first in James's line. Shakespeare significantly makes him a good and innocent man whereas Holinshed and others recorded him as Macbeth's accomplice in the murder of Duncan. This sop to James allowed the author to call into question the divine right of kings theory, and get away with it.

Greenblatt has written a readable and perceptive book but it only touches the surface of Shakespeare's political analysis. It does not answer the vital questions. How did the playwright acquire such intimate knowledge of the corridors of power? Greenblatt doesn't touch on *Hamlet*, which is merciless in its dissection of Elizabethan politics. And why did the thought police leave him alone despite his penetrating criticisms? □

## Books in Brief

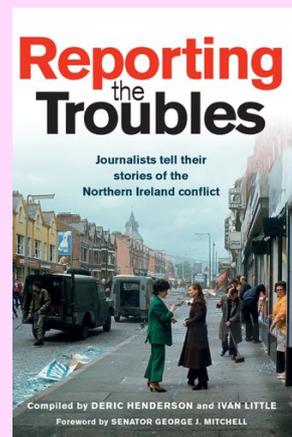
MARY Robinson has served as the first female president of Ireland from 1990-1997, and as United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights from 1997-2002. She is now president of the Mary Robinson Foundation – Climate Justice, a centre working to secure global justice for those people vulnerable to the impacts of climate change who are usually forgotten – the poor, the disempowered and the marginalised across the world.



In this lucid and concise work she and journalist Caitríona Palmer profile a dozen admirable individuals, mostly women, who are coping with climate disasters in vulnerable areas and pointing the way to a sustainable future. They include Vu Thi Hien, who works on forest preservation in Vietnam, and Australian skincare entrepreneur Natalie Isaacs, who tackles plastic waste.

Robinson believes that individual local action can develop into a global movement which proceeds from the realisation that climate change, human rights, justice, equality and individual empowerment are all inextricably linked. It is a pity that her optimism hasn't yet rubbed off on her home country which ranks worst in Europe on climate action. The world itself continues to bury its head in the increasingly hot sand. In October the UN warned that only a dozen years remain for global warming to be kept to a maximum of 1.5C, beyond which even half a degree will greatly worsen the risks of drought, floods, extreme heat and poverty for hundreds of millions of people.

JOURNALISTS Deric Henderson and Ivan Little have compiled a book of short essays by 68 fellow journalists in which they tell their stories of working in Northern Ireland during the Troubles. Beginning in 1968 with an eyewitness report of the day that civil rights protestors clashed with the police in Derry, the stories take in some of the most horrific atrocities: Bloody Friday, Bloody Sunday, Claudy, Greysteel, Kingsmill, Darkley and Omagh.



The journalists include Eamon Holmes, Gloria Hunniford (on the Abercorn restaurant bomb) and Wendy Austin (on the La Mon bomb). Kate Adie recalls how she found a shot man dead under a Christmas tree and his young son beside him telling her: "Daddy won't get up". Martin Bell recalls being sent a memo from a group of loyalists in Dungannon who warned that they were going to send him home in a coffin. And in a surreal moment one 'citizen of Belfast' rang up the BBC to complain that an explosion in his street had not been shown on TV.

*Reporting the Troubles* is published by Blackstaff Press; *Climate Justice* is published by Bloomsbury