

TYRANT

Shakespeare on Politics



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GREENBLA

One

OBLIQUE ANGLES

FROM THE EARLY 1590S, at the beginning of his career, all the way through to its end, Shakespeare grappled again and again with a deeply unsettling question: how is it possible for a whole country to fall into the hands of a tyrant?

“A king rules over willing subjects,” wrote the influential sixteenth-century Scottish scholar George Buchanan, “a tyrant over unwilling.” The institutions of a free society are designed to ward off those who would govern, as Buchanan put it, “not for their country but for themselves, who take account not of the public interest but of their own pleasure.”¹ Under what circumstances, Shakespeare asked himself, do such cherished institutions, seemingly deep-rooted and impregnable, suddenly 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?

Such a disaster, Shakespeare suggested, could not happen without widespread complicity. His plays probe the psychological mechanisms that lead a nation to abandon its ide-

als and even its self-interest. Why would anyone, he asked himself, be drawn to a leader manifestly unsuited to govern, someone dangerously impulsive or viciously conniving or indifferent to the truth? Why, in some circumstances, does evidence of mendacity, crudeness, or cruelty serve not as a fatal disadvantage but as an allure, attracting ardent followers? Why do otherwise proud and self-respecting people submit to the sheer effrontery of the tyrant, his sense that he can get away with saying and doing anything he likes, his spectacular indecency?

Shakespeare repeatedly depicted the tragic cost of this submission—the moral corruption, the massive waste of treasure, the loss of life—and the desperate, painful, heroic measures required to return a damaged nation to some modicum of health. Is there, the plays ask, any way to stop the slide toward lawless and arbitrary rule before it is too late, any effective means to prevent the civil catastrophe that tyranny invariably provokes?

The playwright was not accusing England's current ruler, Elizabeth I, of being a tyrant. Quite apart from whatever Shakespeare privately thought, it would have been suicidal to float such a suggestion onstage. Dating back to 1534, during the reign of the queen's father, Henry VIII, legal statutes made it treason to refer to the ruler as a tyrant.² The penalty for such a crime was death.

There was no freedom of expression in Shakespeare's England, on the stage or anywhere else. The 1597 performances of an allegedly seditious play called *The Isle of Dogs* led

to the arrest and imprisonment of the playwright Ben Jonson and to a government order—fortunately not enforced—to demolish all the playhouses in London.³ Informants attended the theater, eager to claim a reward for denouncing to the authorities anything that could be construed as subversive. Attempts to reflect critically on contemporary events or on leading figures were particularly risky.

As with modern totalitarian regimes, people developed techniques for speaking in code, addressing at one or more removes what most mattered to them. But it was not only caution that motivated Shakespeare's penchant for displacement. He 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. His plays suggest that he could best acknowledge truth—to possess it fully and not perish of it—through the artifice of fiction or through historical distance. Hence the fascination he found in the legendary Roman leader Caius Martius Coriolanus or in the historical Julius Caesar; hence the appeal of such figures from the English and Scottish chronicles as York, Jack Cade, Lear, and, above all, the quintessential tyrants Richard III and Macbeth. And hence, too, the lure of entirely imaginary figures: the sadistic emperor Saturninus in *Titus Andronicus*; the corrupt deputy Angelo in *Measure for Measure*; the paranoid King Leontes in *The Winter's Tale*.

Shakespeare's popular success suggests that many of his contemporaries felt the same thing. Liberated from the surrounding circumstances and liberated, too, from the endlessly repeated

clichés about patriotism and obedience, his writing could be ruthlessly honest. The playwright remained very much part of his place and time, but he was not their mere creature. Things that had been maddeningly unclear came into sharp focus, and he did not need to remain silent about what he perceived.

Shakespeare understood, as well, something that in our own time is revealed when a major event—the fall of the Soviet Union, the collapse of the housing market, a startling election result—manages to throw a garish light on an unnerving fact: even those at the center of the innermost circles of power very often have no idea what is about to happen. Notwithstanding their desks piled high with calculations and estimates, their costly network of spies, their armies of well-paid experts, they remain almost completely in the dark. Looking on from the margins, you dream that if you could only get close enough to this or that key figure, you would have access to the actual state of affairs and know what steps you need to take to protect yourself or your country. But the dream is a delusion.

At the beginning of one of his history plays, Shakespeare introduces the figure of Rumor, in a costume “painted full of tongues,” whose task is ceaselessly to circulate stories “blown by surmises, jealousies, conjectures” (2 *Henry IV* Induction 16).⁴ Its effects are painfully apparent in disastrously misinterpreted signals, fraudulent comforts, false alarms, sudden lurches from wild hope to suicidal despair. And the figures most deceived are not the gross multitude but, rather, the privileged and powerful.

For Shakespeare, then, it was easier to think clearly when the noise of those babbling tongues was silenced and easier to tell the truth at a strategic distance from the present moment. The oblique angle allowed him to lift off the false assumptions, the time-honored beliefs, and the misguided dreams of piety and to look unwaveringly at what lay beneath. Hence his interest in the world of classical antiquity, where Christian faith and monarchical rhetoric do not apply; his fascination with the pre-Christian Britain of *King Lear* or *Cymbeline*; his engagement with the violent eleventh-century Scotland of *Macbeth*. And even when he came closer to his own world, in the remarkable sequence of history plays extending from the fourteenth-century reign of Richard II to the downfall of Richard III, Shakespeare carefully kept at least a full century between himself and the events he depicted.

At the time he was writing, Elizabeth I had been queen for more than thirty years. Though she could on occasion be prickly, difficult, and imperious, her fundamental respect for the sanctity of the realm's political institutions was not generally in doubt. Even those who advocated a more aggressive foreign policy or clamored for a harsher crackdown on domestic subversion than she was willing to authorize ordinarily acknowledged her prudent sense of the limits to her power. Shakespeare is very unlikely to have regarded her, even in his most private thoughts, as a tyrant. But, like the rest of his countrymen, he had every reason to worry about what lay just ahead. In 1593, the queen celebrated her sixtieth birthday. Unmarried and childless, she stubbornly

refused to name a successor. Did she think she was going to live forever?

For those with any imagination, there was more to worry about than the stealthy assault of time. It was widely feared that the kingdom faced an implacable enemy, a ruthless international conspiracy whose leaders trained and then dispatched abroad fanatical secret agents bent on unleashing terror. These agents believed that killing people labeled as misbelievers was no sin; on the contrary, they were doing God's work. In France, the Netherlands, and elsewhere they had already been responsible for assassinations, mob violence, and wholesale massacres. Their immediate goal in England was to kill the queen, crown in her place one of their sympathizers, and subjugate the country to their own twisted vision of piety. Their overarching goal was world domination.

The terrorists were not easy to identify, since most of them were home-grown. Having been radicalized, lured abroad to training camps, and then smuggled back into England, they blended easily into the mass of ordinary, loyal subjects. Those subjects were understandably reluctant to turn in their own kin, even ones suspected of harboring dangerous views. The extremists formed cells, praying in secret together, exchanging coded messages, and trolling for other likely recruits, drawn largely from the population of disaffected, unstable youths prone to dreams of violence and martyrdom. Some of them were in clandestine contact with the representatives of foreign governments who hinted darkly at invasion fleets and support for armed uprisings.

England's spy services were highly alert to the danger: they planted moles in the training camps, systematically opened correspondence, listened in on conversations in taverns and inns, and carefully scrutinized ports and border crossings. But the danger was difficult to eradicate, even when the authorities managed to get their hands on one or more of the suspected terrorists and questioned them under oath. After all, these were fanatics licensed by their religious leaders to deceive and instructed in what was called "equivocation," a method of misleading without technically lying.

If the suspects were interrogated under torture, as was routinely done, they were still often difficult to break. According to a report sent to the queen's spymaster, the extremist who assassinated Holland's Prince of Orange in 1584—the first man ever to kill a head of state with a handgun—remained uncannily obdurate:

The same evening he was beaten with ropes and his flesh cut with split quills, after which he was put into a vessel of salt and water, and his throat was soaked in vinegar and brandy; and notwithstanding these torments, there was no sign whatever of distress or repentance, but, on the contrary, he said he had done an act acceptable to God.⁵

"An act acceptable to God": these were people brainwashed to believe that they would be rewarded in heaven for their acts of treachery and violence.

The menace in question, according to the zealous Protestants of late-sixteenth-century England, was Roman Catholicism. To the intense vexation of the queen's principal advisers, Elizabeth herself was reluctant to call the threat by its name and to take what they regarded as the necessary measures. She did not wish to provoke an expensive and bloody war with powerful Catholic states or to tar an entire religion with the crimes of a few fanatics. Unwilling, in the words of her spymaster Francis Walsingham, "to make windows into men's hearts and secret thoughts,"⁶ for many years she allowed her subjects quietly to hold on to their Catholic beliefs, provided that they outwardly conformed to the official state religion. And, despite vehement urgings, she repeatedly refused to sanction the execution of her Catholic cousin Mary, Queen of Scots.

Having been driven out of Scotland, Mary was being held, without charge or trial, in a kind of protective detention in the north of England. Since she had a strong hereditary claim to the English throne—stronger, some thought, than Elizabeth herself—she was the obvious focus for the machinations of the Catholic powers of Europe and for the overheated daydreams and dangerous conspiracies of Catholic extremists at home. Mary herself was foolhardy enough to sanction sinister designs on her behalf.

The mastermind behind these designs, it was widely believed, was none other than the pope in Rome; his special forces were the Jesuits, sworn to obey him in everything; his hidden legions in England were the thousands of "Church