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Op-Ed Shakespeare

All the world's a stage, and the men and women merely politicians.

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Shakespeare wrote about kings. Not, as the tour guide at the Globe Theatre told me, because the nobility were the reality stars of their day and the masses wanted to know all their business, but because Shakespeare, like his near-contemporaries John Locke and Thomas Hobbes, was a serious political philosopher. Here, in five essays on five very different regimes portrayed by Shakespeare, Professor Timothy W. Burns of Skidmore College builds on this notion.

Rulers who do well, Burns writes, take special care to teach their subjects a respect for justice and an awe for the divine. But they cannot rely on either if they wish to survive. In *Julius Caesar*, for example, we begin with a tragedy of self-government: Rome is in crisis, oddly, because it has produced too many excellent men. Caesar, Antony, and Brutus all might make excellent kings, but they have no established way to share power. The threat of tyranny is real, and there is no way to prevent it, except, apparently, through murder. Where there is no structural outlet for ambition, the principle of "might makes right" prevails. Civil war breaks out, the strongest man wins, and a republic devolves into an empire.

In *Macbeth*, as in *Julius Caesar*, we see the origins of tyranny. But now we see it in the context of Christianity, where it becomes *wicked* tyranny. There are no villains in *Julius Caesar*; in *Macbeth*, however, Lord and Lady Macbeth have the knowledge of good and evil—and they choose evil. Christianity complicates the struggle. Duncan is a king by divine right, but he is not a great ruler: He tramples on his subjects and expects to be regarded (and, indeed, regards himself) as a kind of divine being. He is also bad at spotting traitors.

Macbeth, chafing under the royal yoke and sensing his own greatness, desires to be king. But unlike Locke, who argued that kings lose their divine authority if they rule tyrannically, Macbeth keeps on believing in Duncan's divine authority—and so must rebel against that, too. Macbeth then decides that no horror is off-limits: He kills his friends, he kills children, he cavorts with the Devil. Yes, that Devil. Burns points out that Macbeth acquires a mysterious servant (named "Seyton" in the text) who shows up at the very end, just before Lady Macbeth is carried off to Hell. When Macbeth cries, *Come, put mine armour on; give me my staff. / Seyton send out*, Burns thinks he's talking to Satan himself.

This is one of many places in the text where Burns takes something minor and runs with it. But even if Shakespeare was just being suggestive with the naming of Seyton, the meaning fits: A tyrant is armed by evil and has no way of protecting himself except through bloody force. But it's not enough: Macbeth is undone, and peace and order return—only after a parade of avoidable horrors.

King Lear is a double-pronged tragedy. To Shakespeare, the mortality of kings is a fatal flaw that makes even the most successful monarchy an inferior form of government. Lear's kingdom *would* be secure forever, except for the fact that Lear is about to die and his realm will collapse without him. Lear learns the hard way that being good and noble in this world is insufficient for justice to prevail. This knowledge is so terrible that it breaks him.

In his final essay, Burns presents his political ideal in the form of Prospero, Shakespeare's philosopher-king from *The Tempest* who uses his powers (which come not from sorcery but from careful study of "the liberal arts") to teach his subjects, friendly and not-so-friendly, how to behave. Of course, Prospero's "students" believe that these lessons are coming from God and nature; they've all been hoodwinked by Prospero's tricks. But this doesn't mean that the lessons Prospero teaches are invalid. They may come from nature after years of study, or they may come from God, as revealed to Prospero. Either way, Burns suggests, most people require Prospero's "rough magic" to rule and to be ruled.

Of the plays discussed here, only *The Tempest* has a happy ending. And yet, since *The Tempest* teaches that a ruler yields justice only if he is magical and wise, our expectations for politics and government are lowered. And since most politicians cannot summon spirits from the vasty deep, Burns looks, in his central essay, to the cosmopolitan commercial republic of *The Merchant of Venice* for an example of the best possible regime. Portia is able to prevent tragedy because Venice is a city of laws, not a city of men. Rather than break the law to save Antonio, Portia uses it, thereby preserving the institutions that will protect her fragile marriage with Bassanio. (Portia also tempers the Venetians' desire for revenge, shaming them away from killing Shylock in favor of a conversion to Christianity.)

In *Julius Caesar*, *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, and *The Tempest*, relations among the public, the private, and the divine are either conflated, confused, or deficient. And it all ends badly: tyranny, civil war, witches, general viciousness. In *Merchant*, Shakespeare draws a strong line between those problems that can be solved in public and those that must be solved in private. This is also the only play Burns discusses that does not require magic to avoid tragedy.

Shakespeare's political wisdom deals largely with the limits of politics. The full flourishing of the soul must be sought offstage, and the greatest abuses of power happen when rulers overstep their boundaries. Seeing justice done isn't pretty, even in verse—and it is with a certain amount of force and fraud, as well as pious restraint, that just rule is possible in Shakespeare's universe.

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