
Mary Ann McGrail. *Tyranny in Shakespeare*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2001. 180p.

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Tyranny is “political and human, not an historical curiosity or a psychological aberration” (1), according to McGrail’s *Tyranny in Shakespeare*. It is not described by words such as “authoritarian, totalitarian, despot, or most strongly dictator” (13) that 20th-century writers have used to replace it. It is for Shakespeare “an expression of underdeveloped excessive desires for love or honor” by the tyrant whose “unrestrained, elemental desires...are linked to inner and outer distortions of language” (1). McGrail explores this little understood dynamic in four of Shakespeare’s “dramas of tyranny,” *Macbeth*, *Richard III*, *The Winter’s Tale*, and *The Tempest*.

Does Shakespeare rely on Aristotle’s idea that “tyranny is the worst of all possible regimes,” or is he taken with Machiavelli’s argument that “a disguised tyranny [is] potentially the best possible regime” (1)? McGrail argues that these four plays place Shakespeare in a middle position between Aristotle’s “reticence” and Machiavelli’s “forwardness” (1). To illustrate her point, McGrail addresses the tyrant in these plays primarily to determine the “conflicting and contradictory passions” (1) that underscore their actions and choices.

Why choose to study *Macbeth*, *Richard III*, *Leontes*, and *Prospero* instead of, say, *Angelo* and *Malvolio* and *Portia* and *Orlando*, each of whom acts the tyrant? McGrail argues that Shakespeare’s “petty tyrants” (i.e., his comic ones) achieve their passion for tyranny only momentarily by “taking advantage of another character’s defect or weakness, or the temporary abuse of power” (2) for some political or personal end. *Macbeth* and *Leontes*, conversely, illustrate great passion, *Richard* and *Prospero* great intellect, and all four are shaped by their inner compulsions and their need for political power. She argues that *Macbeth* is essentially the “outstanding man seduced by honor” (2), *Richard III* the ambitious man seduced by his own self-awareness, *Leontes* the confused man seduced by a compelling need for love, and *Prospero* the scholarly man seduced by his intellect.

McGrail does an admirable job in drawing out the subtleties of these characters, devoting a full chapter to each and linking them for their characteristics while showing the variations Shakespeare achieved in their differing portrayals. If we are looking for a thorough psychological dissection of these tyrants, McGrail’s analyses fill that need.

But not all of her claims to Shakespeare’s purposes are entirely defensible. What Shakespeare purposed in his plays is ultimately unknowable, only theorizable, and when

we assert with surety we wreck upon the shoals of ambiguity, Shakespeare's revenge upon the dozen or more generations of scholars that have followed in his wake.

For instance, she says that the plays dramatize tyranny as a "political entity...as well as a state of being," but claims that Shakespeare cares more for plot structures ("what happens to") and psychological effects ("within the tyrant"), the "soul or soulessness of the tyrant" (13), than for the larger issues of the effects on the populace of oppressive political practices: "What tyranny does to the state qua state and to its individual subjects is not important, but is best understood by looking within the disordered mind and passions of the tyrant himself... Shakespeare is trying to bring his audience to this connection" (13, 24). Yet Malcolm's and Macduff's weeping for Scotland (IV.iii), Gonzalo's "ideal commonwealth" speech (II.i) or Caliban's anger at the usurpation of his island, Richard's concern for public opinion (III.vii), or Hermione's dramatic reintroduction (V.iii), all point to a concern for mending or at least addressing socio-political rifts in the state resulting from preceding tyrannical behavior.

"Tyranny" is "an arbitrary or unrestrained exercise of power; despotic abuse of authority" (Webster's *Unabridged*). By definition, then, it is largely determinable by its effects ("exercise of power," "abuse of authority"). To discount the importance of tyranny's effects is to turn the analysis from tyranny as a political problem, which it certainly is in the plays, to a psychological problem. While the interior dimension of the tyrant is interesting and germane to understanding these plays, only a part of tyranny is there in McGrail's analyses.

She also leavens her discussion with statements difficult to swallow whole. Macbeth "after the murder of Duncan loses any positive concern for establishing a line of his own" (34), yet it is part of his motive for ordering Banquo's murder and for his frustration at Fleance's escape, and it must therefore be a factor in his maniacal depression as the play progresses. In describing Shakespeare's "women 'fiends'" (36), she states that, like Lady Macbeth, Goneril, and Cymbeline's Queen "also kill themselves and confess all in the last instant" (36). But Goneril's confession is to poisoning Regan, reported by a Gentleman (V.iii.257-258), and Cornelius simply tells Cymbeline that the Queen is dead: "With horror, madly dying, like her life / Which, being cruel to the world, concluded / Most cruel to herself" (V.v.27, 31-33), which suggests natural (i.e., psychological) causes ("madly dying"). And Lady Macbeth's death is even more tersely stated: "The Queen, my lord, is dead" (V.v.16), with no further explanation—and with no confession, unless the earlier sleepwalking scene stands for a confession. Shakespeare leaves their respective ends ambiguous. And of Richard, McGrail says he "is not entirely a creature of his own creation"; "He cannot simply make what he wants out of himself: nature has imposed certain

limitations on him” (64), suggesting that because “ugly” Richard “cannot prove a lover” (I.i.29) his course must be shaped *by nature* “to prove a villain” (I.i.30), that he is not responsible for what he does, that his course is determined by “some motivating intelligence behind it all, however malicious or incomprehensible to human reason” (64). I think Richard controls his milieu far more than McGrail allows.

Even with these arguable assertions, I find McGrail’s achievement here outstanding, her conclusions generally valuable, and the linkage of these four plays and protagonists under the banner of tyranny in some ways brilliant. This book is worth getting and reading and using in the classroom, especially because in places her statements stimulate disagreement rather than certainty. ✱