Louis Boulanger, "King Lear and the Fool in the Storm," 1836, oil on canvas. Photo credit: Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, NY

S. T. Lee Lecture in the Humanities: Images of Power in Shakespeare

Stephen Greenblatt
Introduction by Denis Donoghue

This presentation, the second annual S. T. Lee Lecture in the Humanities, was given at the 1889th Stated Meeting, held at the House of the Academy on March 9, 2005. An excerpt from Stephen Greenblatt's talk follows Denis Donoghue's introduction.

With appreciation to the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) for its support of the S. T. Lee Lecture in the Humanities and other humanities activities and research at the American Academy. Any views, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in these lectures, publications, humanities activities, and research projects do not necessarily represent those of the NEH.

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Denis Donoghue

I deem it an honor to introduce Stephen Greenblatt on the occasion of his giving the second annual S. T. Lee Lecture in the Humanities. He is the Cogan University Professor of the Humanities at Harvard University. He is also the author of several fundamental studies of Renaissance English literature – or rather of the literature we are now admonished to call Early Modern. The central figure in this literature is Shakespeare, whom Professor Greenblatt sees in diverse relations to Sir Thomas More, John Donne, Sir Walter Raleigh, and other writers. As if this were not enough, Professor Greenblatt is the chief scholar in what is called the New Historicism.

A few weeks ago I read a book I should have read when it was published in 2000, *Practicing New Historicism*, by Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt. I read the book in the hope of discovering the theory that issued in such practice. As you know, for the past twenty or thirty years, students of the humanities have been preoccupied with – or beset by – what we are accustomed to call Theory. At various times in this period, Theory has manifested itself under other names, notably Structuralism, post-Structuralism, and Deconstruction. Adepts of these theories have also been the most vigorous combatants in what some have designated as the Culture Wars. It is my understanding that none of the combatants can claim victory; on the other hand, none has been compelled to admit defeat. Most of them appear to have withdrawn into an aggrieved state of silence, either because of exhaustion or because their particular war has come to seem, even to themselves, hardly worth the cost in sweat and acrimony.

The only remark I would make about Structuralism, post-Structuralism, and Deconstruction on this occasion is that they obliged their adepts to become amateur philosophers and amateur linguists, or at least to maintain the semblance of a relation to those disciplines, a semblance one might devise by reading selected passages from Nietzsche, Saussure, Husserl, and Heidegger. Insofar as I tried to keep up with my more athletic colleagues during those years, I often find myself recalling the passage in *Sincerity and Authenticity* in which Lionel Trilling said that it was "characteristic of the intellectual life of our culture that it fosters a form of assent which does not involve actual credence" (Lionel Trilling,

Sincerity and Authenticity [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1973], 171). I assume that assent in this distinction is merely notional, a willingness to entertain a set of notions without undertaking to hold them as values, to live by them, or otherwise to take them seriously. Credence is a commitment.

The book I mentioned, *Practicing New Historicism*, turned out to be an occult pleasure. For one thing, it was impossible to discover whose voice I was listening to at any moment, Catherine Gallagher's or Stephen Greenblatt's. That was no doubt the intention of the authors, dual authorship being a piquancy of the book, and ventriloquism a method of holding the reader's bewildered attention. I was especially intrigued by the passage in which someone – either Professor Gallagher or Professor Greenblatt – said:

> Our pleasure in Hamlet's vividness ... comes from knowing – and marveling – that he is an invention. An invention, moreover, with a strangely diffuse source, for the relative obscurity of Shakespeare's life, the scantiness of his biography, even the tenacity of crackpot theories about his real identity have made him a figure for both the ineffability of individual genius and the creativity of the species as a whole. (Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt, *Practicing New Historicism* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000], 168)

Reading that book, I felt that it would make an interesting difference to my experience of it if I were to take those sentences as Professor Gallagher's rather than Professor Greenblatt's, or the other way around. The fact, further, that I could deduce no developed theory to sustain the scholarly practices was also an evident intention of the authors. The New Historicism was apparently meant to be a practice exempt from the consequences of a theory. How it differed otherwise from the old Historicism – or from the versions of Historicism that were disputed thirty or forty years ago – was hard to see. The several chapters differed in their procedures from what we call "history of ideas," but in ways not at all easy to describe. Readers of the book are not required to become amateur philosophers or linguists, but to open their minds to the bearing of an irregular or unofficial history upon the poetic, fictive, or dramatic forms being attended to. It is not the kind of history in which historians find themselves saying "And now we come to 1066."

When I read *Will in the World*, his biography of Shakespeare, I wondered whether Professor Greenblatt had taken a vacation from the obligations of the New Historicism to write a book in the best sense popular. But I don't think he has. The book is not a straightforward biography, if we accept that there is such a thing. It is a clarification of the cultural practices which an actor-dramatist, William Shakespeare of Stratford-upon-Avon, negotiated in London and by which in a few years he turned himself into the extraordinary institution we call Shakespeare. The book by Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt, *Practicing New Historicism*, speaks of cultural practices as texts to be studied warily and perhaps skeptically, and again of the New Historicists as choosing for concentrated attention what Ezra Pound called "luminous detail." How Professor Greenblatt chooses such detail depends, of course, on his remarkable tact and intuition.

It is with italicized pleasure that I invite Professor Greenblatt to deliver the S. T. Lee Lecture in the Humanities: "Images of Power in Shakespeare."

Stephen Greenblatt

... in Shakespeare *no* character with a strong desire to govern has an ethically adequate object. This is most obviously true of Shakespearean villains – the Macbeths, the megalomaniac Richard III, the vengeful Tamora in *Titus Andronicus*, the bastard Edmund (along with the ghastly Goneril, Regan, and Cornwall), and the like – but it is also, more surprisingly true of Joan of Arc, on a mission to liberate France but actually, as Shakespeare depicts her, in the service of demons, or Julius Caesar, caught up in his own cult of personality and poised to destroy the tottering liberties of Rome. The conspirators who assassinate Caesar do perhaps adhere to a moral principle: "I was born as free as Caesar," Cassius tells Brutus; "so were you" (1.2.99).* But it is not clear that they themselves have the will to govern; after all, Brutus makes clear in his oration that is precisely the manifestation of this will in Caesar that prompted his murder:

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> As Caesar loved me, I weep for him. As he was fortunate, I rejoice at it. As he was valiant, I honour him. But as he was ambitious, I slew him. (3.2.23 – 25)

If the conspirators do aim to wield power in the newly restored Roman republic, that aim, as the play shows, is doomed by their own internal disagreements and their fatal errors of judgment. At the close the triumphant Antony briefly pays homage to what he calls Brutus' "general honest thought," that is, his ethical motivation –

> All the conspirators save only he
> Did that they did in envy of great Caesar.
> He only in a general honest thought
> And common good to all made one of them. (5.5.68 – 71) –

before he and Octavius turn to the serious business of carving up the Roman state.

Even victorious Henry V – Shakespeare's most charismatic hero – does not substantially alter the plays' overarching skepticism about the ethics of wielding authority. To be sure, in *1 Henry IV*, Shakespeare depicts Prince Hal as already planning his moral "reformation," but the terms betray moral confusion:

> So when this loose behaviour I throw off
> And pay the debt I never promisèd,
> By how much better than my word I am,
> By so much shall I falsify men's hopes;
> And like bright metal on a sullen ground,
> My reformation, glitt'ring o'er my fault,
> Shall show more goodly and attract more eyes
> Than that which hath no foil to set it off.
> I'll so offend to make offence a skill,
> Redeeming time when men think least I will. (1.2.186 – 195)

This is redemption difficult to distinguish from the betrayal of friends and the cynical manipulation of the public.

* Parenthetical references refer to act, scene, and line.

It is those who attempt to pull back from power who fascinated Shakespeare at least as much as those who strive to exercise it.

When Hal becomes king, he makes good on his promise to throw off his old cronies, but he himself is shown to have been cunningly manipulated by cynical prelates in his court and to have launched the invasion of France on the flimsiest of pretexts. No one is more aware than he that there is something deeply flawed in his whole possession and wielding of power, and in a strange speech on the eve of the battle of Agincourt, he queasily negotiates a settlement with God.

> Not today, O Lord,
> O not today, think not upon the fault
> My father made in compassing the crown . . .
> Five hundred poor have I in yearly pay
> Who twice a day their withered hands hold up
> Toward heaven to pardon blood . . .
> More will I do.
> Though all that I can do is nothing worth,
> Since that my penitence comes after ill.

Evidently God is at least temporarily won over – at the end of the play Henry proclaims the death penalty for anyone who denies that the victory was God's alone – but, as the epilogue makes clear, the king's son and successor soon lost everything that his father had won. And the irony is that this son, Henry VI, is virtually the only Shakespearean ruler with a high-minded, ethical goal: a deeply religious man, he is passionately committed to bringing peace among his fractious, violent, and blindly ambitious nobles. Unfortunately, this pious king has no skills at governance whatever. The nobles easily destroy him and plunge the realm into a bloody civil war.

If one wants to find genuine skills at governance in Shakespeare, they are most attractively on display in Claudius, the fratricidal usurper in *Hamlet*. The treatise on the ethics of authority that was most esteemed in Shakespeare's time, Cicero's *De officiis*, argued strenuously that expediency is always inseparable from moral rectitude. As a schoolboy Shakespeare had certainly read *De officiis*, but the playwright went out of his way to demonstrate the opposite, by showing the wily Claudius's remarkable sure-footedness in the con- duct of foreign policy:

> Thus much the business is: we have here writ
> To Norway, uncle of young Fortinbras,
> Who, impotent and bed-rid, scarcely hears
> Of this his nephew's purpose, – to suppress
> His further gait herein; in that the levies,
> The lists and full proportions, are all made
> Out of his subject: and we here dispatch
> You, good Cornelius, and you, Voltimand,
> For bearers of this greeting to old Norway;
> Giving to you no further personal power
> To business with the king, more than the scope
> Of these delated articles allow.
> Farewell, and let your haste commend your duty.

This is the real voice of authority in Shakespeare: business-like, confident, decisive, careful, and politically astute. And it is, of course, the voice of a murderer, the festering source of all that is rotten in the state of Denmark.

It is those who attempt to pull back from power who fascinated Shakespeare at least as much as those who strive to exercise it: the spoiled dreamer, Richard II, who seems to embrace his fall from the throne, the love-crazed Antony who prefers embracing Cleopatra to ruling the world, Coriolanus who cannot abide the ordinary rituals of political life, and old Lear who hopes

> To shake all cares and business from our age;
> Conferring them on younger strengths, while we
> Unburthen'd crawl toward death.

What all of these very different characters have in common – and we could add Duke Vincentio in *Measure for Measure* and Prospero in *The Tempest* – is the desire to escape from the burdens of governance. And in each case and every case, the desire leads to disaster.

For if Shakespeare was deeply drawn to those who want to walk away from positions of authority, he was at the same time convinced that this attempt is doomed. Power exists to be exercised in the world; it will not go away, if you close your eyes and dream of escaping into your study or your lover's arms or your daughter's house. It will simply be seized by someone else, someone probably more coldly efficient than you are and still further away from an ethically adequate object: Bolingbroke, Octavius Caesar, Edmond, Angelo, Prospero's usurping brother Antonio.

"Rapt in secret studies," Prospero loses his dukedom, but, even in exile, he does not escape the authority to which he was culpably indifferent. Instead he finds himself, together with his daughter, on an island that serves as a kind of experimental space for testing the ethics of authority. Prospero possesses many of the princely virtues that the Renaissance prized, but the results of the experiment are at best deeply ambiguous: one of the island's native inhabitants is liberated only to be forced into compulsory servitude; the other is educated only to be enslaved. Prospero does make one crucial ethical breakthrough: though he has his hated brother and his other enemies in his absolute power, he chooses not to exact vengeance upon them. Instead he simply takes back the dukedom he had lost twelve years earlier and returns to the city from which he had been exiled.

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It would be possible, I believe, to argue that Shakespeare's pessimism was the consequence of the political defects of his age. The absence of any conception of democratic institutions and the rule of a hereditary monarch with absolutist pretensions left little or no room to formulate an ethical object for secular ambition. Yet Shakespeare's own skepticism seemed to extend to the popular voice, so ironically treated in *Julius Caesar* and *Coriolanus*. That is, when he tried to imagine electioneering, voting, and representation, he conjured up situations in which people, manipulated by wealthy and fathomlessly cynical politicians, were repeatedly induced to act against their own interests. Perhaps the manifest power of Shakespeare's work in our own times suggests that his skepticism has some continuing relevance.

Rule in Shakespeare is the fate of those who have been born to it. It is the fate of those as well who have been driven to exercise it out of desperation, forced, like Richmond in *Richard*

III, Edgar in *Lear*, or Malcolm in *Macbeth*, to confront an evil so appalling that they have no other choice but to act. A relatively small number of other characters, generally born in the proximity of power but not its direct heirs, actively seek to seize the reins of government, and a few of these are ruthless or lucky enough to be successful, but Shakespeare inevitably depicts them as eventually broken by the burden they have shouldered. Perhaps this was for him a peculiar form of consolation or hope.

Governance, as Shakespeare imagines it, is an immense weight whose great emblem is the insomnia that afflicts the competent, tough-minded usurper Bolinbroke, after he has become Henry IV:

> O sleep, O gentle sleep,
> Nature's soft nurse, how have I frighted thee,
> That thou no more wilt weigh my eyelids down
> And steep my senses in forgetfulness? . . .
> Wilt thou upon the high and giddy mast
> Seal up the ship-boy's eyes, and rock his brains
> In cradle of the rude imperious surge . . .?
> Canst thou, O partial sleep, give thy repose
> To the wet sea-boy in an hour so rude,
> And in the calmest and most stillest night,
> With all appliances and means to boot,
> Deny it to a king? Then happy low, lie down.
> Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown.
> (2 H 4 3.1.5 – 31) ■

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