

for Macbeth is for him to be put on public display, with a banner advertising the show:

We'll have thee, as our rarer monsters are,
Painted upon a pole and underwrit,
"Here may you see the tyrant." (5.7.55-57)

Though he has "supped full with horrors" and plumbed the depths of despair, Macbeth sees this carnival-like end as unbearably degrading. Friendless, childless, utterly alone, he has nothing to cling to except bare life, and that life, as he has put it bleakly to himself, has fallen into the sere, the yellow leaf. He fights and is killed. Macduff raises the "cursèd head" he has severed and proclaims that tyranny has come to an end. "The time is free" (5.7.85).

from Tyrant by
Stephen Greenblatt

Eight

MADNESS IN GREAT ONES

RICHARD III AND MACBETH are criminals who come to power by killing the legitimate rulers who stand in their way. But Shakespeare was also interested in a more insidious problem, that posed by those who begin as legitimate rulers and are then drawn by their mental and emotional instability toward tyrannical behavior. The horrors they inflict on their subjects and, ultimately, on themselves are the consequences of psychological degeneration. They may have thoughtful counselors and friends, people with a healthy instinct for self-preservation and a concern for their nation. But it is extremely difficult for such people to counter madness-induced tyranny, both because it is unanticipated and because their long-term loyalty and trust have inculcated habits of obedience.

In the Britain of *King Lear*, though the aged king begins to act with the unchecked willfulness of a tyrannical child, at

first no one dares to say a word. Having decided to retire—“To shake all cares and business from our age,/Conferring them on younger strengths” (*King Lear* 1.1.37–38)—he assembles his court and announces his “fast intent,”—that is, his fixed decision. He declares that he will divide his kingdom into three, distributing the parts to his daughters in proportion to their ability to flatter him:

Tell me, my daughters,
Since now we will divest us both of rule,
Interest of territory, cares of state,
Which of you shall we say doth love us most,
That we our largest bounty may extend
Where nature doth with merit challenge?
(1.1.46–51)

The idea is insane, and yet no one intervenes.

It is possible that the spectators to this grotesque contest say nothing because they believe it is merely a formal ritual, designed to gratify the autocrat’s vanity on the occasion of his retirement. After all, one of the highest-ranking noblemen, the Earl of Gloucester, remarks in the play’s first moments that he has already seen a map with the division of the kingdom scrupulously plotted out. And at this point in Lear’s long reign, everyone may be accustomed to the great leader’s boundless desire to hear his praises sung. While inwardly rolling their eyes, they sit around the table and give him the “mouth-honor” he wants, telling him how blessed

they are to stand in his shadow, how overwhelmed they are by his accomplishments, and how they value him more “than eye-sight, space and liberty” (1.1.54).

But when Lear’s youngest daughter, Cordelia, his favorite, refuses to play the nauseating game, it all suddenly becomes deadly serious. Enraged by Cordelia’s principled recalcitrance—“I love your majesty/According to my bond,” she says, “no more nor less” (1.1.90–91)—Lear disinherits and curses her. Then finally is opposition to Lear’s behavior openly expressed, and only by a solitary person, the Earl of Kent. The loyal Kent begins to speak with the requisite ceremonious courtesy, but Lear abruptly cuts him off. Dropping the courtly manner altogether, the earl then voices his objection directly:

What wouldst thou do, old man?
Think’st thou that duty shall have dread to speak
When power to flattery bows?
To plainness honor’s bound
When majesty falls to folly. Reserve thy state,
And in thy best consideration check
This hideous rashness. (1.2.143–49)

There are other responsible adults in the court. Watching the scene unfold are the king’s elder daughters, Goneril and Regan, and their husbands, the Dukes of Albany and Cornwall. But none of them or any of the others in attendance seconds the objection or voices even a modest protest. Only Kent dares to say openly what everyone plainly sees: “Lear



is mad" (1.1.143). For his frankness, the truth-teller is banished forever from the kingdom, on pain of death. And still no one else speaks out.

Lear's court faces a serious, possibly insuperable problem. In the distant age in which the play is set, roughly in the eighth century B.C.E., Britain does not seem to have any institutions or offices—parliament, privy council, commissioners, high priests—to moderate or dilute royal power. Though the king, surrounded by his family, his loyal thanes, and his servants, may solicit and receive advice, the crucial decision-making power remains his and his alone. When he expresses his wishes, he expects to be obeyed. But the whole system depends on the assumption that he is in his right mind.

Even in systems that have multiple moderating institutions, the chief executive almost always has considerable power. But what happens when that executive is not mentally fit to hold office? What if he begins to make decisions that threaten the well-being and security of the realm? In the case of King Lear, the ruler had probably never been a model of stability or emotional maturity. Discussing his impulsive cursing of his youngest daughter, the king's cynical older daughters, Goneril and Regan, remark that his advancing years are only intensifying qualities that they have long observed in him. "'Tis the infirmity of his age," one notes, "yet he hath ever but slenderly known himself." "The best and soundest of his time," agrees the other, "hath been but rash" (1.1.289–92).

The disinheriting of their sister Cordelia does not threaten Goneril and Regan. On the contrary, since they get

to gobble up her share of the kingdom, it is in their immediate interest. They therefore make no attempt to mitigate their father's tyrannical rage. But they know that he may at any moment turn on them as well. They are dealing with both his deep-rooted habits of mind—what they call their father's "long engrafted condition"—and the effects of old age: "Then must we look from his age to receive not alone the imperfections of long engrafted condition, but therewithal the unruly waywardness that infirm and choleric years bring with them" (1.1.292–95). What particularly worries them are his "unconstant starts" (1.1.296)—that is, outbursts such as they have just witnessed in the banishing of Kent. It is extremely dangerous to have a state run by someone who governs by impulse.

Goneril and Regan are very nasty pieces of work, concerned only for themselves. But they grasp that they have a serious problem on their hands, and they quickly take steps at least to protect their own interests, if not those of the realm. Though their father has decided to turn over the actual running of the state to them and their husbands, he has retained a retinue of a hundred armed servants. These the daughters act almost immediately to remove from his control, lest he do something rash. First they cut the number to fifty, then twenty-five; then the downward spiral continues: "What need you five-and-twenty? Ten? Or five?" asks Goneril. Regan: "What need one?" (2.2.442–44). It is ugly, and it is about to get still uglier. But the stripping away of the retainers stems from the recognition that an impulsive narcissist,

accustomed to ordering people about, should not have control even of a very small army.

When he first began to act rashly and self-destructively, Cordelia and Kent were the only ones willing to speak out against Lear's tyrannical behavior. Both of them did so out of loyalty to the very person most outraged by their words, a person they lovingly hoped to protect. With their banishment and Lear's abdication, there is nothing to prevent the country from disintegrating. The disintegration was set off by the king's lawless whim, but it is not he—stripped of his power and falling into madness—who will assume the mantle of tyranny. Rather, it is his vicious daughters, who show themselves to be unconstrained by any respect for the rule of law and indifferent to fundamental norms of human decency.

Kent's loyalty to Lear leads him, at the risk of his life, to return in disguise in order to serve his ruined master. But it is too late to avert the disaster that the king has brought upon himself. Kent has been effectively muzzled; Cordelia has been exiled. The only person who can still say openly what everyone perceives has happened is the Fool, a satirical entertainer—the equivalent of a late-night comedian—who is permitted by social convention to articulate what would otherwise be suppressed or punished. "I am better than thou art now," the Fool says to Lear. "I am a fool, thou art nothing" (1.4.161). And in the new regime presided over by Lear's daughters, even this limited form of free speech is impermissible. Goneril makes clear to her father that she will no longer endure the insolence of his "all-licensed fool" (1.4.168), and

Regan is no better. Shivering and miserable, having been driven out into the wild storm along with the mad king, by the middle of the play the Fool disappears forever.

With Lear, unlike Richard III or Coriolanus, we have almost no glimpses into his childhood, where the seeds of his personality disorder may have been sown. We see only a man who has been long accustomed to getting his way in everything and who cannot abide contradiction. In the midst of his madness, sitting in a wretched hovel with a blind man and a beggar for his company, he still has delusions of grandeur: "When I do stare, see how the subject quakes" (4.6.108). But his insanity is shot through with lightning flashes of hard-earned truth. "They flattered me like a dog," he recalls. Everyone fawned upon him, he now grasps, praising him for mature wisdom when he was in fact still only a callow youth. This is the closest we get to the roots of his narcissism: "To say 'Ay' and 'No' to everything I said! 'Ay' and 'No' too was no good divinity" (4.6.97–100).

Nothing in such an upbringing could prepare Lear to grasp reality in his family, in his realm, or even in his own body. He is a father who wrecks his children; he is a leader who cannot distinguish between honest, truthful servants and corrupt scoundrels; he is a ruler who is unable to perceive, let alone address, the needs of his people. In the first part of the play, when Lear is still on the throne, those people are entirely invisible. It is as if the king has never bothered to take in their existence. Looking into a mirror, he has always seen someone larger than life, "every inch a king" (4.6.108).

Hence his horrible surprise when, cold and shaking with fever, he grasps finally that he has been surrounded by flatterers who have constantly lied to him:

When the rain came to wet me once, and the wind
to make me chatter, when the thunder would not
peace at my bidding, there I found 'em, there I smelt
'em out. Go to, they are not men o' their words.
They told me I was everything. 'Tis a lie. I am not
ague-proof. (4.6.100–105)

“They told me I was everything.” It is a moral triumph of some kind for so extreme a solipsist to realize that he is, after all, subject to the same bodily afflictions as everyone else.

But Shakespeare's play looks soberly at the tragic cost of this quite modest realization. Lear insists that he is “more sinned against than sinning,” but he cannot be held entirely innocent of the fact that his two older daughters are twisted monsters who seek to kill him. He is certainly not innocent of the disastrous fate of his youngest daughter, whose moral integrity he spurned and whose love he failed to understand. He has evidently failed, as well, to distinguish between the basic decency of Goneril's husband, Albany, and the sadism of Regan's husband, Cornwall, and he has split his kingdom without grasping the high likelihood of violent conflict between the two ruling parties.

It is only when Lear himself wanders out into a wild storm that he takes in the plight of the homeless in the land over

which he has ruled for many decades. As the rain beats down on him, the question he asks is a powerful one:

Poor naked wretches, wheresoe'er you are,
That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,
How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,
Your looped and windowed raggedness defend you
From seasons such as these? (3.4.29–33)

But even as he asks the question, he knows that it is too late for him to do anything to relieve their suffering: “Oh, I have ta'en/Too little care of this!” (3.4.33–34). And what he now thinks—that the rich should expose themselves to what wretches feel so that they may share some of their superfluous wealth with them—hardly constitutes a new economic vision for the country he has ruled.

The monstrous self-absorption that fueled Lear's catastrophic decisions does not vanish because of his exposure to adversity; it remains the organizing principle of perception. When he encounters a homeless beggar, he can only imagine that the man's miseries came about for the same reason as his own: “Didst thou give all to thy daughters, and art come to this?” (3.4.47–48). Certain that the answer must be yes, Lear begins to curse the poor man's ungrateful daughters. And when Kent (in disguise) corrects the mistake—“He hath no daughters, sir”—Lear explodes in rage: “Death, traitor! Nothing could have subdued nature/To such a lowness but his unkind daughters” (3.4.66–68). Lear has lost everything

by this point, but he still has the mind of the tyrant who will brook no disagreement: "Death, traitor!"

Nearing the play's end, after Lear has recovered at least partial sanity, acknowledged the folly of his actions, and begged the forgiveness of Cordelia (who has returned to England to fight on his behalf), he continues to have difficulty distancing himself from the self-centeredness that precipitated the disaster in the first place. Taken captive, along with Cordelia, by forces under the command of the ruthless Edmund, Lear emphatically overrules his daughter's request that they be brought to see her sisters: "No, no, no, no" (5.3.8). Why does he not think that they should try at least to beg some mercy? Because he is in the grip of a fantasy—poignant, hopelessly unrealistic, and in this way supremely selfish—that in prison with his youngest daughter he will, after all, obtain what he had originally intended: to set his rest, as he put it, "on her kind nursery" (1.1.121). "We two alone will sing like birds in a cage," he tells Cordelia;

So we'll live,
And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh
At gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues
Talk of court news, and we'll talk with them too—
Who loses, and who wins; who's in, who's out—
And take upon 's the mystery of things,
As if we were God's spies. (5.3.9–17)

Even were this a fantasy that Cordelia could possibly share and find appealing, she is too realistic to think it is remotely pos-

sible. Led away to prison and to the almost certain death that she knows looms there, she is conspicuously, painfully silent.

IN *THE WINTER'S TALE*, a play he wrote late in his career, Shakespeare returned to the idea of a legitimate ruler who, descending into madness, begins to behave like a tyrant. In the case of Leontes, king of Sicilia, the precipitating cause is not senile rage; rather, it is a sudden onset of paranoia, which takes the form of a conviction that his wife, Hermione, then nearing the full term of a pregnancy, has had an adulterous affair and is carrying a child that is not his. His suspicion falls on his best friend, Polixenes, the king of Bohemia, who has been visiting Sicilia for the past nine months. Leontes initially broaches his conviction to his chief counselor, Camillo, who, horrified, tries to disabuse the king of his fixed idea: "Good my lord, be cured/Of this diseased opinion," he urges, and quickly, "For 'tis most dangerous" (*The Winter's Tale* 1.2.296–98). Leontes insists that his charge is true and, when the counselor again demurs, explodes with rage: "It is. You lie, you lie./I say thou liest, Camillo, and I hate thee" (1.2.299–300). The jealous king offers no proof; only his emphatic insistence.

A tyrant does not need to traffic in facts or supply evidence. He expects his accusation to be enough. If he says that someone has been betraying him, or laughing at him, or spying on him, it must be the case. Anyone who contradicts him is either a liar or an idiot. The last thing the tyrant wants,

end. The tyrant, the playwright reflected, always and necessarily has powerful enemies. He can hunt down and murder some of them; he can compel others to bend under his will and to offer him what Macbeth calls "mouth-honor." He can employ spies in every house and listen in the dark to whatever is being whispered around him. He can reward his followers, rally his troops, and stage an endless succession of public events that celebrate his innumerable accomplishments. But he cannot possibly eliminate everyone who hates him. For eventually almost everyone does.

No matter how tight a net the tyrant weaves, someone always manages to slip through and make it to safety. "Thou must not stay," says the Roman general Titus Andronicus to Lucius, the only survivor of his twenty-five sons. The tyrant Saturninus has just slaughtered his son's two remaining brothers and countenanced the rape and mutilation of his sister. Lucius escapes to the Goths, where he raises an army and returns to kill the tyrant and assume power. "May I govern so," he declares in the end, "To heal Rome's harms and wipe away her woe" (*Titus Andronicus* 5.3.145-46). Similarly, in *Richard III* Queen Elizabeth urges her son Dorset to "go, cross the seas/And live with Richmond" in Brittany. "Go," she pleads, "hie thee, hie thee, from this slaughterhouse" (*Richard III* 4.1.41-43). His brother, his uncle, and his two half brothers have been killed by the tyrant, along with innumerable others, but Dorset succeeds in joining Richmond, who leads the forces that topple the hated tyrant. The victor, making a similar pledge at the play's end to heal the nation's

wounds, offers a prayer: "God, if Thy will be so,/Enrich the time to come with smooth-faced peace/With smiling plenty, and fair prosperous days" (5.5.32-34).

So, too, in *Macbeth* the murdered king's sons realize the imminent danger they are in. This is hardly the moment to offer ceremonious thanks to their hosts, the Macbeths. "What should be spoken here," one whispers to the other, "where our fate,/Hid in an auger-hole, may rush and seize us?" "Therefore, to horse," agrees the other. "And let us not be dainty of leave-taking" (*Macbeth* 2.3.118-19, 140-41). The sons sneak off, endure the false charge that they were particides, and live to bring down the tyrant. The play, however, ends on a darker note than either *Titus* or *Richard III*. Malcolm, the newly proclaimed king of Scotland, says that he plans not only to call home "our exiled friends abroad/That fled the snares of watchful tyranny" but also to produce forth, presumably for trial, "the cruel ministers/Of this dead butcher and his fiend-like queen" (5.7.96-99). There will be a reckoning.

Slip away, get out of the tyrant's range, make your way across a border, join forces with other exiles, and return with an invasion force. That is the basic strategy, and it is not only a literary one: it has served for resistance fighters in Nazi Germany, Vichy France, and many others places. As Shakespeare understood, the strategy is hardly without risk. The plan may go awry, as Buckingham's does, and end in execution rather than escape. Friends and family may suffer. The tyrant may hold a loved one hostage, as when Richard III



seizes Lord Stanley's son in order to ensure his loyalty. "Look your heart be firm," he tells the anguished father. "Or else his head's assurance is but frail" (*Richard III* 4.4.495-96). As Macduff finds, the blow may fall heavily on innocent loved ones left behind.

The high cost of this resistance strategy is most powerfully depicted in *King Lear*. Though her father had in senile rage disinherited her before his retirement, Cordelia is determined to save him from her two evil older sisters, Goneril and Regan, who, with their husbands, rule the country and who now seek the old man's life. Returning to Britain from France, whose king she had wed, and leading a French army, she declares the altruism of her motives: "No blown ambition doth our arms incite,/But love, dear love, and our aged father's right" (*King Lear* 4.3.25-26). Her forces have secretly been in contact with important figures in the kingdom, people who have been shocked by the harsh treatment of the old king by Goneril and Regan and who have taken note of the tension between their husbands, the well-meaning but weak Duke of Albany and the unspeakably cruel Duke of Cornwall. The stage seems set for the restoration of decency, a victory comparable to that of Richmond over Richard or Malcolm over Macbeth.

But it does not happen. Instead, against all expectations, the forces of the wicked sisters triumph. Cordelia and her army are defeated. Taken captive, she and her father are sent to prison, and Edmund, the general who has led the victorious British forces, secretly orders her murder. Since

Albany is ineffectual and Regan's husband, Cornwall, has died, Edmund is poised to take over the realm. The bastard son of the Earl of Gloucester, he has no legitimate claim to the throne. But he sums up in his person many of the tyrant's attributes. He is bold, inventive, conniving, hypocritical, and utterly ruthless. He has reached his position first by hatching a plot that led to his brother Edgar's banishment and then by betraying his own father. Both wicked sisters are mad for him, and he muses jauntily over his choice: "Which of them shall I take?/Both? One? Or neither?" (5.1.47-48).

In all of the historical sources, the virtuous Cordelia is the victor and assumes the throne, but in Shakespeare's version, Cordelia, shockingly, is hanged in prison. She has been the embodiment in the play of everything decent and upright, the hope of redemption from all the cruelty and injustice that have been visited upon the kingdom. Her death leaves a wound that will never completely heal. But at least the triumph of evil is short-lived. Regan is poisoned by her jealous sister, Goneril; Edmund is killed in single combat by his brother, Edgar, against whom he had wickedly plotted; and Goneril commits suicide. At the end, none of the truly vicious people in the play is alive to enjoy the fruits of victory.

Still, their deaths cannot not erase the tragedy of Cordelia's loss or the unspeakable grief of her father, who dies heartbroken by what has transpired:

And my poor fool is hanged. No, no, no life?
Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life,

And thou no breath at all? Thou'lt come no more,
Never, never, never, never, never! (5.3.281–84)

Shakespeare insists here, more poignantly and urgently than anywhere else in his work, on the irreparability of the losses that tyranny leaves in its wake. There is no equivalent to Richmond's proud declaration in *Richard III* "The day is ours; the bloody dog is dead" (*Richard III* 5.5.2) or to Macduff's "Behold where stands/Th'usurper's cursèd head. The time is free" (*Macbeth* 5.7.84–85). When in *King Lear* a messenger announces, "Edmund is dead, my lord," Albany replies, "That's but a trifle here" (*King Lear* 5.3.271).

Shakespeare did not think that tyrants ever lasted for very long. However cunning they were in their rise, once in power they were surprisingly incompetent. Possessing no vision for the country they ruled, they were incapable of fashioning enduring support, and though they were cruel and violent, they could never crush all of the opposition. Their isolation, suspicion, and anger, often conjoined to an arrogant overconfidence, hastened their downfall. The plays that depict tyranny inevitably end at least with gestures toward the renewal of community and the restoration of legitimate order.

But in *King Lear*, the overwhelming emphasis on what is called the "general woe" and the "gored state" makes it difficult for Shakespeare to stage these gestures. The most plausible candidate to pick up the broken pieces is the young Edgar. The last lines in the play are in one early text given

to him; in another, to Albany, who is decently inclined but morally compromised. It seems as if the actors in the company were competing to deliver them or as if Shakespeare himself was uncertain. In any case, the lines are not, as we might have expected them to be, a manifestation of political leadership. They are, rather, the expression of the traumatic aftermath of the kingdom's ordeal:

The weight of this sad time we must obey;
Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say.
The oldest hath borne most; we that are young
Shall never see so much, nor live so long.
(5.3.299–302)

This is the voice of a man speaking for a community in a state of shock.

In *Richard III*, the main opposition to tyranny forms around the Earl of Richmond; in *Macbeth*, around the king's son Malcolm. Both assume power at the end. There is no comparable figure in *King Lear*. Instead—and astonishingly—the moral courage is glimpsed in a very minor character far below the society's social radar and whose name we never learn. It is a servant, one of the mass of domestics who surround all figures of great wealth and authority, and he does not like what he is seeing. His master, Regan's husband, the Duke of Cornwall, is personally conducting an interrogation. In the wake of Lear's retirement, Cornwall is one of the two rulers of the country, and he has got word of the French inva-

sion force led by Cordelia with the aim of restoring Lear to the throne. It is imperative to keep the old king from reaching Cordelia's army, but Cornwall has now learned that the nobleman whose house he is in, the elderly Earl of Gloucester, is collaborating with the invaders and has sent Lear to Dover.

Cornwall has Gloucester bound to a chair and, together with his wife, begins to question him roughly: "Wherefore to Dover? . . . Wherefore to Dover? . . . Wherefore to Dover?" (3.7.50–55). Failing to get the answers he wants and increasingly enraged, Cornwall tells his servants to hold the chair. He then leans over and tears out one of Gloucester's eyes. The scene is startling—members of the theater audience often faint—but what immediately follows might have seemed to a Renaissance audience, who knew that suspected traitors were often tortured, even more startling. As the fiendish Regan urges her husband to pluck out the other eye too, a voice suddenly calls out, "Hold your hand, my lord" (3.7.72). Shakespeare does nothing to soften the shock of the unexpected command. The words are spoken not by one of Gloucester's sons, by a noble bystander, by a gentleman in disguise, or even by someone in Gloucester's household. They are spoken by one of Cornwall's own servants, someone long accustomed simply to doing his bidding. "I have served you ever since I was a child," he declares. "But better service have I never done you/Than now to bid you hold" (3.7.73–75).

King Lear does not address the subject of tyranny in any theoretical way. But it stages unforgettably a moment when someone in the ruler's service feels compelled to stop what he

is witnessing. Regan is outraged at the interruption: "How now, you dog?" (3.7.75). And Cornwall, drawing his sword and using the term for feudal vassal, is no less so: "My villain?" (3.7.78). There follows a violent skirmish, master against servant, that ends when Regan, astonished that a menial would dare anything of the kind—"A peasant stand up thus?"—runs him through and kills him.

The scene of torture then continues, as Cornwall gouges out Gloucester's remaining eye. The loathsome husband and wife drive the blinded man out of his own house with one of the cruelest commands in all of Shakespeare—"Go, thrust him out at gates, and let him smell/His way to Dover" (3.7.94–95)—and Cornwall disposes of the corpse of the servant who presumed to attempt to restrain him: "Throw this slave/Upon the dunghill" (3.7.97–98). But it turns out that the servant's death was not in vain. Cornwall has received a wound from which he shortly after dies. His death, along with the public revulsion aroused by the sight of the blinded old man, significantly weakens the party of Goneril, Regan, and Edmund.

Shakespeare did not believe that the common people could be counted upon as a bulwark against tyranny. They were, he thought, too easily manipulated by slogans, cowed by threats, or bribed by trivial gifts to serve as reliable defenders of freedom. His tyrannicides are drawn, for the most part, from the same elite whose members generate the unjust rulers they oppose and eventually kill. In *King Lear's* nameless servant, however, he created a figure who serves as the very essence

of popular resistance to tyrants. That man refuses to remain silent and watch. It costs him his life, but he stands up for human decency. Though he is a very minor figure with only a handful of lines, he is one of Shakespeare's great heroes.

THE DEVASTATION AT the close of *Lear* poses in its most extreme form questions that hover over all of Shakespeare's representations of tyranny: How can alert and courageous people not merely escape from the tyrant's grasp, in order to fight against him and try to topple him, but prevent him from coming to power in the first place? How is it possible to stop the devastation from happening? In *Richard III*, the hate-crazed Queen Margaret, hovering around the court of King Edward like a dark nemesis, tries to warn the Duke of Buckingham, whom she exempts from her hatred, to beware of Richard:

Take heed of yonder dog.
 Look when he fawns, he bites; and when he bites,
 His venom tooth will rankle to the death.
 Have not to do with him, beware of him;
 Sin, death, and hell have set their marks on him,
 And all their ministers attend on him.

(*Richard III* 1.3.288–93)

But the duke dismisses her warning and serves instead as one of the prime enablers in Richard's rise to power—until he himself falls beneath Richard's axe.

In *Lear*, the courageous Earl of Kent speaks out boldly to try to persuade the king he loyally serves to stop his madness and withdraw the curse he has bestowed on the only daughter who actually loves him. But, in the face of Lear's rage, no one takes Kent's side, and he is banished on pain of death. When Kent disguises himself in order to continue to serve his master, he is entirely unable to stop the catastrophic decline. If anything, his belligerent boldness only further whets the anger of the two wicked daughters, and the kingdom, like the old king himself, spirals into madness and disaster.

There is one play in Shakespeare's whole career that features a systematic, principled attempt to stop tyranny before it starts. *Julius Caesar* opens with the tribunes Murellus and Flavius angrily trying to stop the commoners from celebrating Caesar's triumph over Pompey. They see clearly that the mob's excitement around the general has dangerous political ramifications, and they rush to pull down the decorations that have been hung on his statues:

These growing feathers plucked from Caesar's wing
 Will make him fly an ordinary pitch,
 Who else would soar above the view of men
 And keep us all in servile fearfulness.

(*Julius Caesar* 1.1.71–74)

Their efforts are not without risk. "Murellus and Flavius," we are told, "for pulling scarves off Caesar's images, are put to silence" (1.2.278–79).