

Four hundred years since William Shakespeare's death—Part 1

And a conversation with James Shapiro of Columbia University

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[Part One] [Part Two]

This year marks the 400th anniversary of the death of William Shakespeare, the author of 38 or so plays, more than 150 sonnets and two long narrative poems. Shakespeare is one of the greatest figures in world literature. His plays, translated into every major language, continue to be more widely performed than those of any other dramatist.

Shakespeare contributed significantly to how human beings see and understand each other and the world. Of course, there are obsolete ideas and relationships in his plays—no one jumps entirely out of his or her historical skin—but there is also a living fountain of human behavior, noble, wicked, lustful, idealistic, vengeful, greedy, restless and tender. His drama is an education.

He wrote magnificent history plays, tragedies, comedies and, in the latter part of his career, what are now referred to as romances, some of those in collaboration with younger playwrights.

The dramatist introduced hundreds of new phrases and more than a thousand words into the English language, which contemporary English speakers, unaware of their origin, make use of on a daily basis. Each time we “refuse to budge an inch,” “break the ice,” “wait with bated breath,” “come full circle” or “eat someone out of house and home,” we pay mundane tribute to the indispensable character of Shakespeare’s efforts. He described features of life and of the human personality in a fresh, indelible, objectively true manner.

In his work, to place things on a more theoretical plane, “new complexes of feelings and thoughts”—in Trotsky’s phrase—decisively broke through “the shell which divides them from the sphere of poetic consciousness” under the influence of a powerful impulse—above all, the decline of the old feudal social order, which had lasted for centuries, and the dizzying, troubling emergence of a new, bourgeois one. The beauty and lyricism of Shakespeare’s language, almost painful at times, and the life-and-death intensity of the emotions he represents are a measure of the force of that historical impulse. So too are the arrival on the scene of two other great dramatists, Christopher Marlowe and Ben Jonson, and a host of immensely talented ones.

Shakespeare’s leading characters are towering figures, because their theme and life purpose, personal emancipation, was towering and revolutionary in that epoch. The Renaissance, including the English Renaissance, put the human individual at the center of things. It was not God or the Church now who could show men and women how to conduct themselves or make their way in the world—an often chaotic and cruel world, but also a dynamic source of endless fascination and possibility.

The German philosopher Hegel, in his *Aesthetics*, speaks strongly to this point. He argues that Shakespeare’s characters do not base themselves “on something higher,” i.e., the Divine, but instead, “unbending and unbent,” rest on themselves and “in this firmness” either realize

themselves or perish. For Shakespeare’s principal human creations, Hegel writes, “there is no question of religious feeling ... or of morality as such.” Instead, we witness individuals on stage who decide on “particular ends which are their own ... and which they now set themselves to execute with the unshakeable logic of passion.” Macbeth, for example, initially “hesitates, but then stretches out his hand to the crown, commits murder to get it, and, in order to maintain it, storms away through every atrocity. This reckless firmness, this identity of the man with himself and the end arising from his own decision, gives him an essential interest for us.”

Shakespeare wrote about kings and queens and archbishops, and also servants and clowns and weavers. Act II of *Henry the Fourth*, Part 1, one of his most brilliant works, begins at 4 am in front of a roadside inn in Rochester, where a carrier (someone who delivered letters and packages in a time before regular mail service) laments the condition of his horse. A second carrier comes in and complains about the wretched “peas and beans” they feed the horses at the inn, the latter’s abundance of fleas (“this be the most villainous house in all London road” in that regard) and its lack of toilets. An ostler (stableman) offstage promises to come ready their animals. A thief enters, etc.

Shakespeare’s work endures in part because he excelled at—and clearly reveled in—creating this kind of “low” and “indecent” scene, as one 18th century actor–writer termed it, as much as he did at representing eloquent, titanic confrontations between titled personages. To as great a degree as any artist in history he confronted reality in an open and sensuous, universal and all-encompassing manner.

The relentless, searching, realistic depiction of life in all its dimensions (James Shapiro below refers to Shakespeare’s “ruthless honesty”) in the English Renaissance theater as a whole over the course of more than half a century had an incalculable, cumulative social effect. Before audiences that included large numbers of commoners, Shakespeare and the other writers presented in revealing detail the often inglorious doings of monarchs, princes and princesses, earls, cardinals and other dignitaries. The playwrights were not consciously subversive, but their dramas, which held up a truthful mirror to English society, helped undermine the social order and make possible the convulsive, revolutionary events of the 1640s.

James Shapiro

James Shapiro (born 1955), professor at Columbia University in New York City, is one of the most remarkable writers on Shakespeare in our day. He has written five books on the subject or related subjects: *Rival*

Playwrights: Marlowe, Jonson, Shakespeare, 1991; *Shakespeare and the Jews*, 1996; *1599: A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare*, 2005; *Contested Will: Who Wrote Shakespeare?*, 2010; and *The Year of Lear: Shakespeare in 1606*, 2015.

The works are rooted in exhaustive research. For his book on Shakespeare's life in 1599, the year the dramatist wrote *Henry the Fifth*, *Julius Caesar*, *As You Like It* and *Hamlet*, for example, Shapiro set himself the task of reading "almost all of the books written in 1599 that Shakespeare might have owned or borrowed or come upon in London's bookstalls." His focus also allowed Shapiro "to reflect on the events of that year—recorded in contemporary letters, sermons, plays, poems, diaries, travelers' accounts, and official records—that had a bearing on Shakespeare's life and work."

The results are often fascinating and eye-opening. Shapiro creates a vivid picture of English social life, with a particular emphasis on crucial political events and their influence on Shakespeare's drama.

There are intriguing elements in all the books, especially the three aimed at a broader audience. *Contested Will* contains a wealth of material on the "controversy" over the authorship of Shakespeare's plays, a controversy largely kept alive for political and ideological reasons. Shapiro identifies the essentially antidemocratic outlook of the leading "Shakespeare deniers," and attempts to get to the bottom of what it was that led some very smart and often insightful people—including Mark Twain, Henry James and Sigmund Freud, among others—to join their camp.

The Year of Lear treats 1606, the twelve months in which Shakespeare wrote three of his greatest tragedies, *King Lear*, *Macbeth* and *Antony and Cleopatra*. Shapiro spends a good deal of time in this book on the impact of the foiled Gunpowder Plot in November 1605 and the brutal repression over the following months of the conspirators, a group of English Catholics who hoped to blow up King James I (James VI of Scotland), a Protestant, along with the rest of the country's political and religious elite. The accession of the Scottish king to the English throne in 1603, on the death of the childless Elizabeth, had produced the "Union of the Crowns" (England, Scotland and Ireland). Shapiro argues persuasively that the momentous, ominous events of 1603-06 strongly informed the writing of *King Lear*, in which the "division of kingdoms" is the great and destructive issue, and *Macbeth*, which of course concerns the "killing of a King of Scots."

However, I would like to concentrate here on a few of the questions Shapiro raises in the preface, prologue and body of *1599: A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare*, because they seem to me to lie at the heart of his specific contribution and to be extraordinarily thought-provoking. Such a discussion will also help, I hope, shed light on the interview posted below.

The Columbia professor, to his credit, establishes clearly from the outset his intent to recount "a good deal of social and political history," as the only means of conveying "a sense of how deeply Shakespeare's work emerged from an engagement with his times." This notion alone sets Shapiro apart from the "postmodernist-industrial complex," whose labors are systematically directed toward rejecting and suppressing such considerations.

Shapiro explains that his book "is both about what Shakespeare achieved and what Elizabethans experienced" in 1599, because the two processes "are nearly inextricable." In an especially potent and—under the present intellectual conditions—nearly provocative paragraph, the author comments: "Shakespeare's appeal is universal precisely because he saw so deeply into the great questions of the day. Shakespeare himself certainly thought of his art in this way: the 'purpose of playing,' he wrote in *Hamlet*, is to 'show ... the very age and body of the time his form and pressure.'"

Shapiro goes on to say that 1599 was "perhaps *the* decisive" year in Shakespeare's "development as a writer," but that 15 years earlier when

he had begun the project of researching it, "I didn't know enough about the historical moment in which plays like *As You Like It* and *Hamlet* were written and which they engaged." The work, then, grew out of this "frustration." Shapiro very seriously and, in the end, successfully set out to address his historical ignorance.

The reader, if he or she is sufficiently interested, should turn to 1599 and its account of such episodes as the English army's attempt to crush rebellion in Ireland, the return of the Earl of Essex from Ireland after his military failure, the new armada threat from Spain, the founding of the East India Company and the mounting anxiety over royal succession.

In a fascinating chapter, Shapiro draws a connection between intense political repression under the aging queen and the writing of *Julius Caesar*, about which he asserts, "No play by Shakespeare explores censorship and silencing so deeply as the one he was writing during these months" in 1599. He adds, a few pages later, "Something extraordinary was beginning to happen as Shakespeare wrote *Julius Caesar* in the spring of 1599. The various strands of politics, character, inwardness, contemporary events, even Shakespeare's own reflections on the art of writing began to infuse each other."

After a discussion of the Earl of Essex and his fate, interwoven as they were with the weakening and decline of the "ancient nobility" and its "culture of honor," Shapiro writes: "*Hamlet*, born at the crossroads of the death of chivalry and the birth of globalization, is marked by these forces... They cast a shadow over the play ... and certainly inform its reflections on the possibility of heroic action. They also reinforce the play's nostalgia: there's a sense in *Hamlet* no less than in the culture at large of a sea change, of a world that is dead but not yet buried."

There are two further points, which I raised in the discussion with Professor Shapiro, but to which I feel the need to draw attention here, because they seem to me so pregnant with implications, and not simply for literature.

First, Shapiro, in his discussion of *Julius Caesar*, after observing that the playwright "was born into an England poised between worlds," profoundly and elegantly writes: "From the start of his career as dramatist and poet, Shakespeare was compulsively drawn to epochal moments, to what it meant to live through the transformation of so much that was familiar." One almost wants to add, and this was a key to his genius!

The phrase legitimately pleases Shapiro so much that he also applies it to the writing of *Hamlet*, asserting that "Shakespeare once again found himself drawn to the epochal, to moments of profound shifts, of endings that were also beginnings." Pointing to the Reformation—which itself was an episode in "the long fight of the bourgeoisie against feudalism" (Engels)—and the death of the old religion, Catholicism, the author points out that "Shakespeare's sensitivity to moments of epochal change was both extraordinary and understandable." *Hamlet* conveys, he writes, "what it means to live in the bewildering space between familiar past and murky future." All this speaks to the powerful, determining influence of social life, "the great questions of the day," on art and the artist.

Second, Shapiro makes a valuable point, in my view, about Shakespeare and the rigorous, demanding artistic course he chose, which must pertain as well to every intellectual-moral endeavor of a serious kind.

Shapiro comments that Shakespeare at a certain point—and he presumably locates this condition in or around 1599—"was able to write plays that appealed to audiences across a wide spectrum," but was nonetheless "frustrated by the limits this imposed on what he could write." His desire "to experiment ... to wrestle with increasingly complicated social, historical, and political issues ... jarred with the demands of writing plays that had to please all."

Should he adapt himself to prevailing tastes and opinions in an effort to satisfy one portion or another of his audience? Shapiro writes: "Shakespeare's way out of the dilemma of writing plays as pleasing at court as they were at the public theater was counterintuitive. Rather than

searching for the lowest common denominator, he decided instead to write increasingly complicated plays that dispensed with easy pleasures and made both sets of playgoers work harder than they had ever worked before.”

Isn’t this the arduous path taken by the most farsighted and historically ambitious figure or figures in every important field, that is, the individual or tendency most sensitive to the objective undercurrents, not yet visible to great numbers of people?

I spoke to James Shapiro at his office on the Columbia University campus, where he has taught for 32 years, in November. I asked him first about the history of his interest in Shakespeare, which he has discussed in other interviews. He explained that he was “force-fed Shakespeare in junior high school and at Midwood High School, in Brooklyn, New York” and despite “a pretty good teacher, I hated it.” He never took a college course on the playwright as a result of this unhappy initial experience.

Shapiro added, “When I write and when I think about Shakespeare, the ideal audience I have is made up of those who never went to college, who feel Shakespeare is distant from them and feel alienated from it. I’m pretty adamant about trying to reach a different kind of audience, who share a confusion that I can still remember.”

His attitude changed through his encounter with the British theater in the 1970s and 1980s, “which was always holding that mirror up to postwar Britain. Whether it was seeing history plays there, whether it was Ian McKellen’s *Coriolanus* in 1984, or whether it was plays at the National Theatre where you really begin to see how authoritarian rulers come into power... It was an education without signing up for the courses.”

Over the course of several years, he would quit whichever “crummy job” he was holding down in New York “and go over to London in August and see 25 plays in 25 days. So after six years or so of that I had seen 150 to 200 plays... This was a moment of terrific theater, with great directors. The government was still subsidizing theater in significant ways, although the authorities were not entirely comfortable with it. It was a moment before HBO or Netflix, which would steal away great talent, or Hollywood for that matter... So my timing was very fortunate.”

I asked what route had led him to teaching Shakespeare. He attended Columbia as an undergraduate, where “I was not a very good student,” and the University of Chicago as a graduate student (“I wasn’t a very good grad student either”). He knew he would be a teacher of some sort, because “everyone in my family was a teacher.”

He spent a year teaching at Dartmouth, “and I was a really good teacher, especially in my mid-20s, but I was told by the vice chairman of the department that they already had one Jewish Shakespearean, and they couldn’t have two.” I told Shapiro that I was not surprised this was Dartmouth’s policy, but I was astonished the vice chairman of the department was so open about it.

“Well, he said it. It wasn’t personal; it was just the way Dartmouth was. He didn’t say it with regret or with any pleasure; it was simply the reality. I went to Goucher College for two years in suburban Maryland. Columbia advertised for a revolving door position. No one had gotten tenure in this department for a generation. Coming here just meant losing the security of living in Baltimore and coming back to New York and teaching great students. I got tenure seven years later and I’ve been here for 32 years now.

The rest of the conversation follows:

David Walsh: You speak in a couple of places in your books about not writing in an impenetrable fashion and making the decision to appeal to a popular audience. It wouldn’t be letting you in on a secret to suggest this is not the general trend. The postmodern, post-structuralist material I read is certainly impenetrable, deliberately impenetrable and inaccessible. Did you feel you were fighting against the stream or not, at that point?

James Shapiro: East coast, private universities, as opposed, for example, to the University of California system, give you no reward for writing a

book. So if you’re going to write a book, you’re either going to do it out of commitment and passion, or because you want to say something and reach a particular kind of audience. That’s very liberating. It also means if you are going to write a book, it has to be good enough to persuade a commercial publisher to invest in marketing, sales, editing, printing, etc. It means serving different masters and having a different sort of pressure. It also means moving from the saltwater of academic prose to the fresh water that people can drink.

DW: I understand, but still it’s a conscious decision to write for a popular audience.

JS: Mostly, I was trying to ask questions that academics weren’t interested in, but which mattered hugely to me. So I wrote a book called *Shakespeare and the Jews*. I was interested in doing that in part because at the time the academic holy trinity of race, class and gender did not allow for questions of religion and theology. At the same time, I had an intensely personal reason. I was living with and soon married to an Irish Catholic woman. Nobody had ever intermarried in my very observant family. What better way to explore the nature of Jewish identity than to immerse myself in a book about it?

DW: You write in the preface to *1599: A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare*, “Shakespeare’s appeal is universal precisely because he saw so deeply into the great questions of the day.” That’s a tremendously important point to me.

JS: Try that on an academic audience.

DW: That’s my point! This is definitely swimming against the stream.

JS: I think it happens in a lot of classrooms, but I think the professionalization of literary studies in our lifetime has meant that people won’t write about that, going back to the politics and pressures in the universities.

The BBC once brought in a number of actors and directors, and me—I think I was the only nonperformer in this group—to talk for four minutes about our favorite character in Shakespeare. The organizers were nervous. They said, “Oh, we’re so sorry, but Hamlet and Lear are already taken.”

I said, “They wouldn’t have occurred to me.” The character that I spoke about is a guy Shakespeare doesn’t even give a name to in *King Lear*. He is simply the First Servant, a guy who has kept his mouth shut and his head down his entire life, and then he sees Gloucester being cruelly blinded by the Duke of Cornwall. “Hold your hand, my lord,” he says. And he goes on, “Better service have I never done you than now to bid you hold.”

In other words, “Don’t do this [the blinding]. I served you ever since I was a child, and I’ve kept my mouth shut.” It’s really a class moment. He doesn’t have a name. I’m sure his lord doesn’t know who he is. They kill each other, effectively. He lived for one moment to do some good. He is a barometer.

In other words, you can push people to the point where they consider what you’ve done to be so morally reprehensible that they will abandon what they previously believed in, cross class barriers, pull out a weapon and say, “This is where I take to the streets.” This is the character I thought worth speaking to and about.

To be continued



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