

Four hundred years since William Shakespeare's death—Part 2

And a conversation with James Shapiro of Columbia University

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20 December 2016

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Yesterday we posted the first part of an article on 400 years since playwright William Shakespeare's death, including an interview with James Shapiro, the author of numerous books on Shakespeare and English Renaissance theater. This is the second and concluding part of the article.

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David Walsh: Let's speak about the "historical sense," and the general lack of it in much of contemporary criticism. You take exception, also in the book on 1599, to the assumption "that what makes people who they are now, made people who they were then."

James Shapiro: There is a fundamental myth that we are like the Elizabethans. In some ways we are, of course—we're born, we breathe, we live, we sleep, we die. Those constants are true, but there are fundamental differences between their culture and ours. So we have to be very clear about the ways in which Shakespeare and the others were our contemporaries and the ways in which they were not our contemporaries.

For example, if you're writing a biography of Shakespeare then you're probably going to bring a set of modern assumptions about when or how we come of age. Do we come of age at nine when—as children often were in Elizabethan England—we're shipped out of our family's home and work in somebody else's household for eight years? Or do we come of age in our late adolescence when we experiment with different sexual, religious and other kinds of identities? Shakespeare's works to my mind have been misread by thinking of his own life, and his own struggles as an adolescent or someone in his early 20s, as directly mirrored in his works.

I have a habit of walking into classrooms—whether it's one full of fourth graders or, like last week, international executives at the business school, to whom I also teach Shakespeare—and asking the same question: how old on average were people in Shakespeare's day when they got married?

Whatever group it is, foreign or domestic, whatever educational level, the answer is something along these lines: 'Girls were 13.' Then I always ask, does anyone want to go lower? And I usually stop them when they get to eight or nine, because it's getting uncomfortable. Boys, they say, were slightly older. You get an average of 14 to 17.

Then I tell them that the Elizabethans were 24 or 25 on average when they got married. We know that for a fact, and we know that by and large they did not engage in premarital sex. So, how does that change your understanding of the culture? How does that mark a difference from our culture? What did people do between 15 and 25? And then the answers get quite interesting. People begin to understand that the differences between our culture and Shakespeare's has an impact on how they understand the plays.

DW: Yes, but the historical sense also suggests something about the impermanence of people and things. People change, societies are not

always the same, they rise and fall.

JS: I'm looking at a relatively narrow historical period, let's say 1564 to 1623. I'm aware of certain things that change, attitudes toward royal authority, attitudes toward capital, attitudes towards those who were born in different lands, or worship different gods. But there are many constants in this period.

DW: But you write about "an England poised between worlds."

JS: Yes, but it is difficult to register changes as you actually live through those moments. Shakespeare is writing *Hamlet*, remarkably enough, at a moment when a group of merchants are begging Queen Elizabeth for permission to create an East India Company, which is going to change the world. Is he aware of that? No, he's not and he couldn't have been. Shakespeare is tremendously good at identifying past changes. He was a good historian. And he was good at registering the disruptions of his time, but he wasn't really interested in being predictive at all.

DW: No, absolutely not, but you write that "From the start of his career as a dramatist and poet, Shakespeare was compulsively drawn to epochal moments, to what it meant to live through the transformation of what was familiar." A wonderful, suggestive sentence, in my view. Obviously, this was not an entirely conscious process. There is a great deal of intuition. How do you explain that? How is someone drawn to "epochal moments" in that fashion?

JS: That's a great question. First, you can track it, you can look over his shoulder as he reads *Holinshed's Chronicles* [Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland*, published in two editions, 1577 and 1587], *Plutarch's Lives* [Sir Thomas North's translation of Plutarch's *Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans*, published in 1579] and so forth. And you can just feel his attention intensify when he comes upon certain lives, certain moments that he understands have enormous explanatory, generalizing power. That's what got his attention.

DW: More than anyone else's.

JS: Yes, after all, everyone is reading the same books. They're just not landing at those places and saying to themselves, "My God, this is exactly what's at stake, but people read this and don't get it!" So that's where the true genius and inventiveness in Shakespeare can be found. I just read once again five pages of *Holinshed's Chronicles* about the end of the reign of Richard the Second and the beginning of the reign of the man who deposed him [Henry of Bolingbroke, subsequently Henry IV], who had a keener sense of the fragility of political authority, a keener sense of how tired people were with the way things were, and overthrew the old order and established a new one.

Now you look through these five pages, double-columned, fairly tedious pages and there's just no story there. An Elizabethan reader would have just kept going. Shakespeare looked at those five pages and said "This is what's missing, that's what's missing, I can add this, this and this. This

didn't happen that way, but I'll change it." All of a sudden, he captures that moment, which you can term either the deposing of a tyrant or the grab for power by an upstart Machiavellian. It can be read or staged either way. But Shakespeare sees it in those pages and nobody else does, and that's the kind of effort that makes his work meaningful 400 years later.

DW: Does that suggest that, aside from or as part of his own genius, he was feeling powerful impulses that came from outside?

JS: He certainly did, because a few years after he wrote that play, a man [the Earl of Essex] attempting a political coup against a queen [Elizabeth I] who identified herself as Richard the Second paid Shakespeare to put on that play, and they were lucky they weren't all thrown in jail. He knew exactly what he was doing.

DW: This is bound up with the other issues, including the legendary Shakespearean objectivity. You explain, of course, that Shakespeare had to be cautious about expressing his own views because of censorship and so forth. But I don't think that explains everything. You comment in regard to *Henry the Fifth* that it "consistently refuses to adopt a single voice or point of view about military adventurism," and that could be applied to almost every important feature of political life Shakespeare treats: monarchy, republicanism, power, authority, revolution, popular discontent. It's fascinating, incidentally, that the first public use of the word assassination apparently occurs in *Macbeth*.

You speak about the competing critical voices and argue that those who see no story in *Henry the Fifth* are missing the point, that "the debate about the war is the real story." And you make the same general point about *Julius Caesar*, that the play juxtaposes competing political arguments and it is impossible to tell which argument tips the scales. Obviously, every reader or viewer is so struck by this issue—Shakespeare's ability, first of all, to put himself in almost anyone's shoes and work out the logic of what it would be like to be that person. Where does that objectivity come from?

JS: It comes in part from looking out at 2,500 people who have paid a penny to watch your play. They come from the highest to the lowest social class. Unless he knows what is in their hearts and on their minds, they're going to go across the street to the Admiral's Men [a rival theater company] and listen to a Christopher Marlowe play at the Rose. So Shakespeare has to get it right. He has to understand what deeply preoccupies them, what they fear, what they're thinking about when they put their heads on the pillow. He was good at that.

DW: As you say, he's not someone concerned with making blueprints for the future, but you do get the sense that the historical moment was something like a hinge, from which you were able to see both into the past and at least have some sense of the future, or at least that something is coming. You were able to see in both directions.

JS: Something is happening, changing, that's the hardest thing to see and feel. What is actually happening at the moment that we are speaking. Someday, someone will write about November 11 [the day of the interview] and say, that day such and such happened. Something was new, something broke free. If he were alive, Shakespeare would be my go-to guy on that question.

DW: I think that's an absolutely fundamental issue. Balzac has an excellent phrase about how it's a rare merit to be able to take the measure of one's own epoch.

JS: Exactly.

DW: Is Shakespeare the greatest figure in history at doing that?

JS: He may be the best writer at doing that. The really difficult thing is to be able to keep doing it for a quarter of a century.

That Shakespeare could do it from 1588 to 1613, toward the end with the help of some younger playwrights, is impressive. And he's asking the most complicated questions about his time, ranging from marriage and sex to politics and history—all across the board.

DW: In your book *Rival Playwrights*, you write about the 1590s: "These

years were marked by dearth, bad harvests, inflation, high taxation, threats of invasion almost every year, plague, urban tensions, a crisis of empire, the death of most of Elizabeth's advisors in the Privy Council, and of course the problem of succession. Anxiety about war was prevalent, not just in England, but in much of Europe as well."

The question I have, because your books are saturated with this anxiety and restlessness: is it that the new bourgeois world coming into existence was a more publicly, obviously and actively tense one, as opposed to the more static rural society it was replacing ... ?

JS: Absolutely, no question.

DW: ... Or is it—of course, objectively bound up with that—that we have for the first time since the ancient world a group of playwrights who were able to take the barometric reading of a society as a whole?

JS: You know, on the most elementary issues, on the things that are easy for anyone to understand: holiday, the calendar, time ... to pass from the late 15th to the early 16th century was to watch time accelerate, to watch "holiday" disappear, to watch a kind of early alienation from the natural world, which Shakespeare's comedies are filled with. This was profound change and if that doesn't make you anxious in a way you probably can't explain, I don't know what does. That mattered to Shakespeare.

Growing up as a child, his uncles and neighbors would say, "Oh, it's April 23, it's your birthday, we always used to celebrate St. George's pageants on this day, and we no longer do." And all of a sudden, he is thinking: what has changed, what have I lost, what have I missed? So from an early age I suspect Shakespeare was really conscious of worlds that had been lost and being thrust into a vortex—one that he was also able to take economic advantage of. It's nostalgia, but also opportunity for him.

Yes, it is the most vivid picture since the ancient world. And I'll bet as King Charles I was going to the scaffold he was thinking, "This wouldn't be happening to me if those bastards hadn't been writing and staging those plays about the killing of a king for all those years."

DW: That was my next point! You explain the plays are not manifestos, and they are certainly not sympathetic to revolution and the overthrow of monarchies in general. Nonetheless, the accurate depiction of the lives of rulers and changes in regimes, the practical, ungodlike and sometimes positively rotten motives brought out ... all this (not only in Shakespeare) had to have a delegitimizing effect, a destabilizing effect. You mention, for example, that the historical plays of Shakespeare and others "taught them [the people], among other things, to be skeptical of the motives of rulers." A few decades later, a king's head would fall.

JS: The plays do have that destabilizing effect, and the authorities knew that all along. They were wrong in assuming that they could control it. What do I mean by that? Monday morning I'm going to go into class and talk about a handout I'll give them. I'll tell my students, take a look at this and tell me the difference between this sheet and your edition of *Richard the Second*.

Missing are 172 lines, on the deposing of Richard the Second, that the governmental authorities decided could not be printed during Queen Elizabeth's lifetime. You could do it onstage, but it could not be circulated further. To show a king giving up his crown? You couldn't put that on paper. I wanted my students to see what it looks like to airbrush history. That's what this is, like the Stalin-era photos, where somebody's shoulders are still visible, but there's no head.

It was always a game of cat-and-mouse between the playwrights and government officials, who assumed that if they made sure that local, immediate politics didn't enter in, then the more global political sensibility would not be transformed. But over 40 years of putting on these plays proved them seriously, fatally wrong. Art makes you think, which is why people want to cut arts education in this country.

DW: You do wonder, and there's no way of answering this, to what extent the playwrights were conscious of this.

JS: The ones sitting and cooling their heels in jail, like Ben Jonson, were aware of it. He had a lot of time to think about it. He had impulse control issues.

DW: What about Christopher Marlowe?

JS: Marlowe thought he was smarter than the authorities until he was stabbed and killed. Was he bumped off by the government? Let's just say, nobody in that room was clean.

Drama in and of itself, by airing competing ideas, is allowing people to entertain those troublesome views in a society where alternative views did not get much circulation.

DW: But they allowed the murder of Julius Caesar to take place on stage. Was that all right because it was a different epoch, a different country?

JS: It had happened, and everyone knew what had happened. Everyone wrote about it, it just depended how you wrote about it. You could write about it like Dante, who places Brutus in the bowels of hell, or like Milton, who celebrates Brutus as a republican hero.

Of course, typically, Shakespeare doesn't come down on one side or the other. He creates a play that allows people over time to read Brutus as either hero or goat. I've been teaching that play for 30 years. When I started teaching at Columbia you still felt the pull of 1968 and the radical feeling in the room. So about half the students felt Brutus did right, and identified with him. Now he's just a clown to the students. No one stands up for Brutus. It's so sad. I keep waiting for the pendulum to swing the other way.

That's the real fun of teaching over decades. You get to see the slight but steady shift in how a collective group thinks and feels. They're always the same crowd, they're always 20-year-old undergraduates of Shakespeare at Columbia—how do they think? You watch it change over time.

DW: They don't think Brutus should have stuck his neck out?

JS: You'd think that they're young and going to side with someone who stands on his principles and is going to challenge authority. They don't today. When a third of the kids go to work for Goldman Sachs—of course I'm exaggerating—it's no shock. Mind you, the tuition costs and pressures are obscene today. I don't blame them for trying to make money.

DW: How would you say things have changed among your students, if it's possible to generalize?

JS: There are probably far more continuities. This place admits one out of 20 who apply. They're all smart, eager, devoted. I never have to worry about whether they're going to come prepared. But it's harder these days to get them to reveal their political views. They keep those cards close. I don't blame them. My job is to be in their face and I am. They're more passive than they used to be. They're respectful in ways that I don't admire. I tell them that. Have you ever played tennis with someone who hits the ball back softly? Yes. Is it fun? No.

DW: This is one of my favorite lines in the 1599 book. It's in the prologue. You argue "that Shakespeare's way out of the dilemma of writing plays as pleasing at court as they were to the public was counterintuitive. Rather than searching for the lowest common denominator, he decided instead to write increasingly complicated plays that made playgoers work harder than ever." First, how did you reach that conclusion? If you can remember...

JS: I don't know how, but it suddenly struck me that he thoroughly repudiated the model of "Oh, that worked, so let's do it again." He wanted to do something difficult. Unless the audience is getting it and snapping it back, he can't hit the ball as hard as he wants to. Once you get an audience that has seen 30 or 50 plays, even if they're illiterate, you can start getting truly complicated in the things that you do. And he did.

But he has to train an audience to do that. We speak about Shakespeare creating plays, but he also created an audience that could understand him. And then he forced that audience to raise its game, again and again. There

are moments of visible impatience such as in the prologue to *Henry the Fifth*: "Use your imagination." Or, again, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. "Use your imagination. This is a collaboration, we have a contract, I'll do my job, you do yours."

DW: That approach, of responding to a dilemma or impasse by increasing the complexity of one's work, is a definition of genius in almost any field, in art, in science, in politics.

JS: In any field. Once you simply are in it for the profit motive, you're done. Shakespeare, above all, is about a ruthless honesty.

I'm sure he had very strong opinions about society, about politics. If he had wanted to be a preacher, he might've made a very good one. But that's not what drama is about. We were all taught in high school about the Aristotelian poetic model: the fall of the great man due to some private or individual fault for which he's punished. We watch him suffer and we feel catharsis. Shakespeare must have thought that was useless.

Hegel in his *Aesthetics* rooted his theory in plays like Sophocles' *Antigone*. The higher gods and lower gods, or Antigone and Creon, are pitted against each other, and you have this collision of imperatives. These ethical, political and social imperatives are equal and powerful and destructive. This is much closer to what Shakespeare figured out—theoretically, although he wouldn't have used that term—about how successful drama works.

DW: You obviously do an enormous amount of research. Did you figure out that need on your own, were there people who were examples, models?

JS: There were "models" of people who went down to the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, DC on a Friday, stayed overnight at the Capitol Hill Suite, found two good bits, came back, gave a talk at the Shakespeare Association meeting the following month and published an article in *Shakespeare Quarterly* that brought them job offers and acclaim.

It was the most anecdotal and thin scholarship. I thought, I need to read everything. I don't have time to read everything written over a 50-year period, so I'll pick a year and read everything that survives that was written during that year, not knowing it would take me over a decade to read everything and then be able to start writing it up. It took me 15 years for 1599. I got it down to 10 for *The Year of Lear: Shakespeare in 1606*. I spent a quarter century on two years and two books, but it was time well spent. I have no regrets.

DW: So for those 10 or 15 years you were driven to find answers to certain questions?

JS: Once you're tenured, you have a certain freedom. But if you want to climb in the academic ranks, and get outside offers and higher salary, and a reduced teaching load, then you put out a book every two or three years. Those books don't endure for the most part. So I was keener on writing something of greater "constancy," but it just takes time.

Shakespeare's model of 12- to 14-hour days for 25 years has always been a good guideline. He was not a "company keeper." He was a worker. You get up, you rehearse that day's play, you have lunch, you stage that play, and when everyone else goes off to have a good time, you read and write by candlelight late into the night. And you do that for a quarter century and you look back at your body of work and you feel, that's pretty good, and you decide to go home to Stratford.

DW: Why do you think he went home to Stratford? Do you think he felt that he had said everything he had to say?

JS: Not everything he had to say, but he had said his piece.

DW: You conclude the 1606 book by writing that Shakespeare "has a better claim to be celebrated as the true 'mirror of Great Britain,' his multifaceted plays brilliantly reflecting the fears and aspirations of his time." This is a highly unfashionable view in the academic world. Don't you know that, according to postmodernism, to speak about art reflecting the world is illicit, almost illegal?

JS: Well, I missed that class.

DW: But how did you manage to miss it?

JS: It didn't speak to me, It didn't work for me. I have a very pedestrian, in every sense of that word, view of the world. So I enter the theater as a member of the crowd pushing up against the stage, rather than looking down at it from some privileged purchase. So I missed that class for that reason. In other words, I could read those theoretical arguments and hang out with the people who were cooler than I was in graduate school and understand them. But if you were interested in answering the questions I was interested in, they weren't as helpful as you thought.

DW: I strongly agree, I'm only saying it's rare.

JS: It's rare just because I'm stubborn and limited in creatively useful ways. Also, knowing the history and material is crucial, because if you speak with a Brooklyn accent and you're not theoretically sophisticated, you have to be able to crush people with evidence.

You don't have to dig very deeply into my books to figure out that the combativeness of my work has to do with the ills of my society, even as the combativeness of Shakespeare's works had to do with the cultural and social divisions and fault lines within his world.

DW: If you were given an audience, let's say a working class audience, of people who were bright and interesting but had no history of Shakespeare, what would you say to interest them in his plays?

JS: I would be situational. I would try to make them understand that what they can't understand about their own lives that's crucial to them can only be accessed through reading or seeing something of Shakespeare's and understanding it. Once there is self-interest involved, people begin to pay attention.

DW: It's a sweeping question, but I'll ask it anyway: what in the most general sense do human beings gain from reading, studying and seeing Shakespeare?

JS: In the most general sense, an understanding of their situation that they lacked an hour or two earlier. I was on the roof of a federal prison in downtown Manhattan in August. It must have been about 100 degrees on that hot roof. There were 19 inmates and eight actors, and Oskar Eustis, who runs the Public Theater. If you ask him, he will take out his mother's Communist Party card from the 1930s.

We asked beforehand how many had ever seen Shakespeare. Two hands went up. How many had seen a play before? Half the hands went up. They were watching a brilliant 90-minute production of *Hamlet*. The alertness, the aliveness during the "To be or not to be" speech was palpable. Is it better to fight, or to shoot up and dream?

Shakespeare matters, and he matters even to those who don't generally have access to him. And those prisoners got it in ways that smug, well-to-do Upper West and East Side audiences, mouthing the words of the soliloquy they know so well, do not get. Let's end with that.

Concluded



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