

Singapore Management University

Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University

Research Collection School of Social Sciences

School of Social Sciences

2-2016

Review of: James Shapiro, 1606: William Shakespeare and the Year of Lear

Emily SOON

Singapore Management University, emilysoon@smu.edu.sg

Follow this and additional works at: https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/soss_research



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Citation

1

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Social Sciences at Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Research Collection School of Social Sciences by an authorized administrator of Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University. For more information, please email cheryl@smu.edu.sg.

James Shapiro. *1606: William Shakespeare and the Year of Lear*. London: Faber & Faber, 2015. £20.00 (hardback), £9.99 (paperback), £5.69 (Kindle). Pp. xiv + 423. ISBN 978-0-571-23578-0.¹

‘For the Jacobean Shakespeare’, James Shapiro tells us, ‘no year’s output would be more extraordinary than that of 1606’.² Between King James’s ascension to the English throne in 1603 and the Gunpowder Plot of late 1605, Shakespeare had penned a paltry two plays, making the speed with which he churned out three great tragedies – *King Lear*, *Macbeth* and *Antony and Cleopatra* – in 1606 even more impressive. After this year, Shakespeare would have two more creative periods before his death a decade later, but no single year would ever be as imaginatively fruitful again.

In *1606: William Shakespeare and the Year of Lear*, James Shapiro, Larry Miller Professor of English at Columbia University, walks the reader through this significant year. The narrative focuses mainly on King James’s quest to unite his kingdom to form Great Britain and the protracted fallout resulting from the Gunpowder Plot, though numerous other events are discussed too, from an alleged case of demon possession to the reinterment of Queen Elizabeth’s corpse. Across the fourteen chapters, Shapiro explores the complex interaction between these events and Shakespeare’s three great tragedies. For the reader, the effect is like participating in an impressively informative historical re-enactment, in which our guide skilfully steps in with impeccably timed comments drawn from contemporary observers as well as with his own assessment of how the events connect with Shakespeare’s life and work. In its style and approach, *1606* can therefore be seen as a Jacobean sequel to Shapiro’s award-

¹ The copy reviewed is the U.K. edition. In the U.S., the text is published as *The Year of Lear: Shakespeare in 1606* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015), with slightly different pagination.

² Shapiro, James. *1606: William Shakespeare and the Year of Lear*. London: Faber & Faber, 2015. p.357.

winning *1599: A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare* (London: Faber & Faber, 2005), which illuminates the intersection between Shakespeare's writing and late Elizabethan society.

Of the three tragedies featured in *1606, King Lear* was the first to be written. Shapiro reads *King Lear*'s ambivalence towards the idea of dividing a kingdom as articulating the fissures in contemporary society resulting from James's unpopular bid to unify his lands. Shapiro shows how Shakespeare captured current cultural tensions by reworking *King Leir*, an old Elizabethan play, into *King Lear*, 'the most searing of Jacobean tragedies'.³ Shapiro also demonstrates how *King Lear* is inflected by contemporary beliefs about demon possession and draws attention to Shakespeare's decision to have Edmund hand Gloucester a letter hinting at murder, a plot device found nowhere in Shakespeare's sources or his earlier works. Given the role ascribed to the mysterious Montegale letter in the discovery of the Gunpowder Plot, Shapiro marvels at how 'uncanny' it was for *King Lear* to include a plot revolving around a strange letter.⁴

More broadly, Shapiro sees the Gunpowder Plot as raising broad questions within Jacobean society as to the nature of evil. Shapiro sees seventeenth century England as increasingly believing that evil is an external force that one can be possessed by, rather than something inherent within mankind. In contrast, Shapiro sees *Macbeth* as articulating a more complex, unsettling vision: borrowing a phrase from Francis Bacon, Shapiro describes *Macbeth* as staging 'another hell above the ground', where characters are driven by the darkness within themselves.⁵ Furthermore, *Macbeth* complicates the contemporary assumption that equivocation – a doctrine Shapiro explains with impressive clarity and comprehensiveness – was used only by Catholic traitors. Somewhat controversially, Shapiro uses the bleak vision

³ Ibid, p.72.

⁴ Ibid, p.150.

⁵ Ibid, p.227.

of humankind articulated in *Macbeth* to support his assertion that '[l]iterary historians would probably locate the end of high hopes for James's regime as early as the spring of 1606'.⁶

Shapiro's claim that Jacobean society gave up on their monarch in early 1606 is debatable, but central to his subsequent argument about *Antony and Cleopatra*. Shapiro tracks how, as James's popularity waned that year, English attitudes towards his predecessor changed: the discontent Elizabeth's subjects had felt late in her reign was now replaced with a romanticised vision of the good old days. Both Shakespeare's main source, Plutarch's *The Life of Antony*, and early seventeenth century England had come down hard on the historical Antony and Cleopatra. Shapiro reads Shakespeare's decision to challenge this cultural consensus and rework the presentation of the Egyptian queen and her soldier lover sympathetically as the bard's way of expressing this longing to return to the Elizabethan era, when devoted warriors paid homage to a great queen.

Over the course of charting these broad arguments, Shapiro interweaves a wealth of other incidents that intersected with the development of the three tragedies. We thus see the three Sibyls who prophesy to James on his way to Oxford in August 1605, hear the rumour that the King had been assassinated in March 1606 and learn of the death of a baby called Cordelia in Shakespeare's parish in October that same year. Shapiro further shows how external events influenced what Shakespeare did *not* write, revealing how the Act 'to Restrain Abuses of Players' in May 1606 influenced Shakespeare's subsequent output, and how the discovery of the Catholic-organised Gunpowder Plot led to Shakespeare generally avoiding references that could be construed as expressing any 'nostalgia for the residual pull' of 'the old religion' in his later work.⁷ Shapiro also elucidates how the plague outbreak in 1606 affected the theatre scene, hastening the demise of the once-fashionable boy companies and enhancing prospects for

⁶ Ibid, p.232.

⁷ Ibid, p.251, p.152.

Shakespeare's company instead. Though the book's focus is on Shakespeare, Shapiro also intermittently discusses the life and work of the contemporary playwright Ben Jonson and makes glancing reference to the impact the Gunpowder Plot had on the young John Milton.

While *1606* is aimed at a wide audience, the dazzling array of cultural history and literary analysis it contains means that any reader is likely to come away having learned something new. Shapiro's particular strength lies in highlighting sources and connections that have received limited scholarly attention. As he did in *1599*, Shapiro draws attention to the invaluable, yet relatively critically neglected, role sermons played in early modern England, revealing how key preachers also 'had their finger on the pulse of the day' and 'both registered and defined the cultural moment'.⁸ In addition, Shapiro includes relevant yet lesser known details about early modern theatre, such as how the staging of any Christian sacrament, including weddings, was forbidden, or how history plays were conventionally concluded by the highest-ranking figure on stage. Shapiro further draws links between the performances staged in 1606 and other parts of the Shakespearean cannon. For instance, Shapiro shows how, long before *Macbeth*, Shakespeare explored the idea of equivocation in *Henry the Sixth, Part 2*, and indicates the possible influence of Jonson's 1606 *Hymenaei* on Shakespeare's 1611 *Tempest*. Shapiro also illuminates how Shakespeare influenced his world, tracing echoes of *Richard the Second* in a speech on the state of the nation by the Attorney General, Sir Edward Coke, and the impact of Shakespeare's presentation of Cleopatra on contemporary cultural artefacts.

In *1599*, Shapiro established his reputation as a careful biographer who limited himself to commenting on Shakespeare's world and works, rather than on the bard's emotional state. Shapiro maintains the same conservative approach in *1606*, taking pains to highlight instances

⁸ Ibid, p.299.

where we simply do not know what happened or the extent to which Shakespeare was involved, and where actual and fictional events may be merely coincidentally rather than causally related. He further dismisses rumours about Shakespeare for which he has found no credible evidence, such as the tale about an alleged relationship between the playwright and the wife of an Oxford innkeeper. Despite Shapiro's cautiousness, building a coherent narrative around a subject who left so few traces invariably involves drawing contestable inferences. For instance, Shapiro's assertion that Shakespeare was 'likely' to have already written the mysterious letter into *King Lear* 'before the Fifth of November' is itself very likely to remain unproven, although in the absence of any other evidence it would be equally unverifiable to suggest that he created this plot device after the discovery of the Montegale letter was made public.⁹ Indeed, though Shapiro brilliantly reconstructs lesser known events, such as King Christian of Denmark's visit, over the course of the book one comes to share Shapiro's 'painful aware[ness]' that so much about Shakespeare's life simply 'cannot be recovered'.¹⁰ However, Shapiro can hardly be blamed for the paucity of surviving records and his skill at re-creating an entire world using scant resources is truly admirable.

One might quibble that the title of the book is somewhat disingenuous, for *1606: William Shakespeare and the Year of Lear* discusses so much more than *King Lear*. Many of the events described in the first several chapters, from Shakespeare's appointment as a King's Man to the Gunpowder Plot itself, also take place from 1603-5 rather than in 1606. One might also quibble that the narrative style and tendency to make allusions to different plays across multiple chapters, as well as the lack of footnotes, may make it challenging for readers who seek to swiftly pinpoint arguments or follow up on the ideas contained within the book. These

⁹ Ibid, p.102, p.150.

¹⁰ Ibid, p.15.

are minor points, however, and it is precisely the book's freedom from academic apparatus and form that gives it its delightful fluidity.

The twenty-first century alone has witnessed the publication of a range of Shakespeare biographies by established scholars. Texts such as Katherine Duncan Jones's *Ungentle Shakespeare* (2001; reissued in 2010 as *Shakespeare: An Ungentle Life*), Stephen Greenblatt's *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare* (2004) and Jonathan Bate's *Soul of the Age: The Life, Mind and World of William Shakespeare* (2008) have deepened our understanding of different aspects of Shakespeare's life. In tracing the broad arc of Shakespeare's life, however, the amount of attention given to any one period is necessarily limited. As Shapiro notes, the general focus on Shakespeare's earlier years has meant that considerably less attention has been paid to the playwright's life after Elizabeth's death in 1603. What *1606* illuminates – in glorious, luxurious detail – is that the world and works of the Jacobean Shakespeare are every bit as rich as that of the Elizabethan one.