

REVIEW

James Shapiro, *1606: William Shakespeare and the Year of Lear*, London: Faber & Faber, 2015, 423 pp. ISBN 978-0-571-23578-0

This year in April four hundred years will have passed since Shakespeare's death (and 452 years since his birth). Are four centuries a time long enough to reconstruct the biography of the Stratford playwright? So much has been already written about the few indisputable facts about Shakespeare that it seems unreasonable to expect that any new scholarly attempts could go beyond the well-established interpretations. Still, in defiance of that, several voluminous biographies of Shakespeare have appeared in recent years. Two books by James Shapiro — *1599: A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare* (2005) and *Contested Will: Who Wrote Shakespeare* (2010) — achieved great success, confirmed by receiving prestigious awards. In 2015, Shapiro once again returned to Shakespeare, sketching his life projected against the backdrop of King James I's third year on the English throne, the year that witnessed dark and turbulent events: a plague outbreak, execution of Catholic traitors and failure of the union with Scotland.

Shapiro's books form a kind of trilogy, kept together by the figure of Shakespeare are represented as a metropolitan artist and attentive observer of both the royal court and London streets at the moment of the major upheaval brought on by a change of the ruling dynasty, the first in a hundred years. However, at first glance, the three books seem to contradict one another. In *Contested Will: Who Wrote Shakespeare*, Shapiro refuted anti-Stratfordian theories, revealing how meagre the foundations of these hypotheses are. Additionally, by disclosing the mechanisms that lead to negating Shakespeare's authenticity, Shapiro attacked a widespread view that literary work necessarily reflects its author's life or, as in the case of Shakespeare, that it is his intimate autobiography written for many fictional parts. In Shapiro's opinion, this assumption, combined with the fascination for Shakespeare's plays, has been responsible for the never-ending search of "other" Shakespeare, whose biography would agree better with the intellectual appeal of his extant works. Shapiro is scornful of other recent Shakespearean biographers: Stephen Greenblatt (*Shakespeare. Will in the World* [2004]) and René Weis (*Shakespeare Revealed* [2007]), who both attempted a reconstruction of Shakespeare's inner life on the basis of his dramas. Nevertheless, in *1606* Shapiro seems to follow in his predecessors' footsteps. Recreating what happened month by month, he evocatively recounts the events, constantly changing perspective. He adopts a va-

riety of voices, presenting viewpoints of an active participant and external observer, of a detached expert on history and uncertain-of-tomorrow inhabitant of ever-changing London. In each case, the aim is to identify factors that may have been decisive in Shakespeare's choosing the subject, storyline and characters for the plays written at the time: *Macbeth*, *Anthony and Cleopatra* and, chiefly, *King Lear*, which, incidentally, is promised in the book's title. The principal question asked here is what compelled Shakespeare to write this grim and cruel tragedy about an irreparable division within the state and family. Reading his texts, Shapiro probes into Shakespeare's personality as well as his intentions and expectations; he examines spells of his silence and explosions of genial creativity. In many respects, therefore, Shapiro resembles other Shakespearean biographers. The difference, however, seems to stem from Shapiro's consistent refusal to probe too deeply, and therefore, too riskily. While others look for emotions, fears and passions, Shapiro usually stops at merely recounting actions of the professional writer who writes his plays on commission in response to current political and aesthetic developments. As long as others lean towards psychoanalysis, Shapiro rather opts for sociology and focuses on describing the circumstances which made Shakespeare use his outstanding talent to produce his hazardously contemporary plays, which, however, in time were declared universal.

What is, then, Shakespeare's world described by Shapiro, who incidentally moves beyond the year 1606? Undoubtedly, it is the time of uncertainty and transition, commenced by the enthronement of James, whose nature and political ambitions Englishmen could know only step by step, with ever growing suspense. Already in 1603 the monarch's entry to the capital was delayed by an outbreak of the plague. Within a few months, 30,000 Londoners died and twice as many fell ill. By autumn, the number of infections decreased but the city was still under threat. The Plague struck again in 1604 as well as in 1606, first in summer and then, quite unexpectedly, in autumn. Shapiro devotes much space to everyday life in the plague-stricken city: he describes the cacophony of the ceaselessly tolling death-bells as well as mass slaughters of dogs unjustly blamed for spreading the disease. He summarises the authorities' orders concerning quarantine and ban on assemblies. He even checks the weekly mortality bills for the parish where Shakespeare lived, illustrating how close to danger he was. Shapiro claims, for instance, that the plague may have killed the wife of Christopher Mountjoy, who was renting a place to Shakespeare at the time. If this is true, Shakespeare did live in the area in imminent danger. On the other hand, the collective trauma that must have been caused in London by the regular epidemics has no reflection in contemporary plays: surprisingly, neither Shakespeare, nor any other playwright ever showed the plague victims' death on the stage.

In autumn 1605, London was rocked by the news of the Gunpowder Plot. In the following months the conspirators were arrested, tried and, in the beginning of 1606, executed. All of these events have been repeatedly discussed as the immediate context of *Macbeth*. However, Shapiro pays special attention to the anti-Catholic laws, especially the Oath of Allegiance that must be sworn by all those who refuse to receive communion at Easter. Shapiro discusses a largely unknown story of how such refusal was made by Shakespeare's daughter Suzanna and his most intimate friends in Stratford, the Sadlers, in April 1606. Although the three nonconformists eventually escaped without any serious punishment, their story still deserves attention, as it clearly demonstrates how little we know about Shakespeare's inner circle of family and friends in Stratford.

No doubt most of the space in the book is devoted to James's endeavours to ratify the real union of England and Scotland and thus create Great Britain. Shapiro writes about the king's determination, his Parliament's growing resistance and, finally, the collapse of the idea. It is this political conflict that is presented as the chief impulse for writing *King Lear*, the play about tragic consequences of dividing a country. Reading its successive versions – preserved in the quarto format and in the First Folio edition – Shapiro analyses the profound pessimism of the drama, in which any of the ageing king's decisions (his kingdom's partition or the passing of his crown to one of his daughters) may be a source of contention. Similarly, each of possible endings of the drama (power taken over by the Duke of Albany or by Edgar) effectively weakens the kingdom. For this reason, the story about the ancient ruler of Britain appears to be a pessimistic meditation on the contemporary dilemma, where no party, involved in the current political strife can really find unequivocal arguments for their cause.

The third play associated with the year 1606 is *Anthony and Cleopatra*. This time, Shapiro claims that Shakespeare was inspired by the royal visit of Christian IV, Queen Anne's brother, as well as by a growing sense of nostalgia for the times of Queen Elizabeth I. In summer, James extravagantly entertained his brother-in-law, satisfying his taste for feasts and amusements. News of the royal entertainment circulated widely and, according to Shapiro, flashes in the kaleidoscope of scenes in *Anthony and Cleopatra*, unveiling the real, drunken world of serious politics. Simultaneously, the passing time increasingly clearly idealises and mythologizes Elizabeth's reign, annoying King James. Shapiro relates the new monarch's fruitless efforts to diminish the deceased queen's memory — for example, he has the royal tombs at Westminster Abbey rearranged so that Elizabeth's exhumed body could be placed next to Mary Queen of Scots, James's mother. It is a paradox, however, that the new engraving made for Elizabeth's tomb quickly gained countrywide popularity and became a visible material sign of her cult. Concern for posthumous reputation is also what motivates Cleopatra's actions in

the drama finale. Although the story itself is borrowed from Plutarch, Shapiro believes that Shakespeare, aware of James's plans for the Abbey, found it particularly appealing.

James Shapiro's *1606: William Shakespeare and the Year of Lear* offers a novel and exceptionally attractive way of elucidating Shakespeare's life. It presents a multitude of little-known, intriguing details in a light *belles lettres* style. Shapiro, in a sense, hides his thorough knowledge of the Shakespearean period in order to lead the reader along the path of events that, in his opinion, had greatest impact on Shakespeare. The method, although inevitably subjective, wins our trust, as the author masterfully keeps the balance between facts and hypotheses. The latter, frequent in the text, protect the readers from a feeling of being manipulated that sometimes appears while reading narratives whose strength derives from the suggestiveness of their anecdotes.

Shapiro's book also highlights a certain feature of Shakespeare's work which is quite obvious but — after four centuries of analysing the playwright's universality, modernity and “globality” — is often disregarded. Shakespeare is here represented as a quintessentially English writer who offers his reflections, deep and often groundbreaking, on the question of Great Britain. He does so in *King Lear*, the play that symbolically turned out to outlive the famous Mirror of Great Britain, the royal jewel with four diamonds and a ruby worn by James to visualise his firm intention to form the union of England and Scotland.

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