James Shapiro, 1599: A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare

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Unlike most biographers of Shakespeare, James Shapiro, in this ingenious book, concentrates on a single year in his life, 1599. It was a decisive year, he says, both for Shakespeare’s career as a writer and for England’s social and political transformation. Shakespeare had already written most of the history plays and about ten of his groundbreaking comedies by this time, establishing himself as the foremost of living playwrights in England. But then he was still groping for his way in the genre of tragedy. His Titus Andronicus and Romeo and Juliet were immensely popular but he had yet to find the new method for representing the inner agony of his later great tragic heroes. Shapiro argues persuasively that Shakespeare learned to put the old convention of soliloquy to innovative use in the tragedies he wrote this year, Julius Caesar and Hamlet.

This book can also be read as an annal of England, 1599. Shapiro illustrates that it was a tumultuous year for many subjects of the aging Queen. On March 27, Londoners crowded in the streets to see the Earl of Essex depart for his expedition to crush the Irish rebellion. Essex, an ardent advocate of chivalric honor, fails to meet expectations of Elizabeth, wasting her money and lives of soldiers in his tactless campaigns against Irish rebels masterminded by the Earl of Tyrone. Irritated Elizabeth sends Essex furious letters commanding speedy suppression of the rebellion, while Essex, on his part, is deeply offended by her ‘unjust’ treatment of him. Shapiro gives us a vivid picture of their antagonism by quoting George Fenner’s letter which reports that “it is muttered at court that [Essex] and the Queen have each threatened the other’s head” (196). In mid-July, rumors of the approach of another Armada gave an additional blow to the already precarious political situation. More than twenty-five thousand men were mustered to defend London from Spanish invaders. By early September, however, it became clear that the rumors were a false alarm, fostering suspicion and skepticism among people as to the government’s secret motive behind the large scale defenses against what they called ‘the Invisible Armada.’ In the mean time, Essex made a truce with Tyrone without the Queen’s consent on September 15, left Ireland with only a few followers and hurried for Nonsuch Palace to appeal to the Queen in person. Shapiro draws on Rowland Whyte’s letter to Sir Robert Sidney to recount how Essex burst into Elizabeth’s bedchamber at ten o’clock in the morning of September 28. Shapiro astutely surmises that Elizabeth, who had once compared herself to Richard II, “didn’t know if Essex had come at the head of an army, if he had killed
his enemies at court, or even whether she herself was in physical danger” (301) at this moment. In the afternoon when she was sure that Essex had returned with only a few supporters and her court was safe, Elizabeth recovered herself as a formidable Queen, dismissed him and told him to await her instructions. It was the moment of Essex’s fall, and it was also the moment, Shapiro argues, when the culture of chivalry died. It is remarkable that Shapiro immediately moves to another significant event that took place at Founders Hall in London on September 24. More than one hundred influential London merchants assembled there to draft a petition to the Queen asking permission for a mercantile voyage to the East Indies. By juxtaposing the moments of the death of chivalry and the birth of the East India Company, he gives us a vivid notion of the political, economical and cultural transitions England experienced in this particular year.

It requires Shapiro’s tremendous scholarly effort and acute insight to elucidate the interplay between Shakespeare’s outer and inner worlds. His method is cautious and bold at once. When he has to deal with the puzzling question of Shakespeare’s personal faith, he starts with the history of the Gild Chapel in Stratford-upon-Avon. Just a few months before Shakespeare was born, the wall paintings of Catholic saints were whitewashed. On Midsummer Day seven years later, the chapel’s stained-glass windows were knocked out. But it was not until October 1571 that Catholic vestments stored in the chapel were disposed of. From those records of local history, Shapiro draws a picture of slow progress of the English Reformation in Shakespeare’s childhood days. The records also reveal that Elizabeth’s government continued to send mixed signals as to the religious celebration days. But what can we know about Shakespeare’s personal faith from this religious local history? Instead of trying to pry into it, Shapiro emphasizes the impossibility of knowing. “To argue that the Shakespeares were secretly Catholic or, alternatively, mainstream Protestants misses the point that except for a small minority at one doctrinal extreme or other, those labels failed to capture the layered nature of what Elizabethans, from the Queen down, actually believed. The whitewashed chapel walls, on which perhaps an image or two were still faintly visible, are as good an emblem of Shakespeare’s faith as we are likely to find” (167). It is a sensible conclusion, concurring with that of Jean-Christophe Mayer’s recent book, Shakespeare’s Hybrid Faith (2006).

Shakespeare wrote Henry V, Julius Caesar, As You Like It and perhaps made out a first draft of Hamlet this year. Shapiro investigates how Shakespeare gave voice to the fears, hopes, doubts and uncertainties ordinary English men and women around him must have felt at that critical time. It is well known that the Chorus of Henry V reflects the immediate political concerns of Shakespeare’s audience. Shapiro argues that the choral passage at the beginning of Act V gives voice not only to the commoners’ expectation for Essex’s military success but also
to their fears and apprehension of civil strife. Shapiro suggests that the phrase “Bringing rebellion broached on his sword” might sound ominous in retrospect. Indeed, several months after the first performance of the play, Essex will rush violently into Elizabeth’s court in a Laertes-like manner.

As Andrew Hadfield’s *Shakespeare and Republicanism* (2005) expounds, Essex’s presence had been posing an ideological threat to Elizabeth’s government long before his rebellion in 1601. Since Henry Savile published his translation of Tacitus’s *Histories* and *Agricola* perhaps under Essex’s patronage in 1591, many of the republican writings in the late 1590’s had been dedicated to him. Shapiro explores how nervous the government was in 1599 about the political implication of those dedications. When John Hayward’s *The First Part of the Life and Reign of King Henry IV*, a prose history dealing with the dethronement of Richard II, was published just before Essex embarked on the Irish campaign, its dedicatory preface aroused doubts among the readers as to the author’s intention. Shapiro quotes John Chamberlain’s letter who wondered “why such a story should come at this time” (135). Elizabeth instructed Francis Bacon to find out some evidence of treason in the book, but Bacon reported wittily that he could only find the evidence of theft, “for he had taken most of the sentences of Cornelius Tacitus, and translated them into English, and put them into his text” (142). However, it was not surprising that the authority decided to ban the book in which the author had “Henry tell his followers that he could not decide ‘whether they be termed rebels or subjects’ until they made clear that their ‘allegiance was bound rather to the state of the realm than the person of the prince’”(145). This is precisely the conviction Shakespeare’s Brutus holds when he decides to assassinate Caesar. Shapiro surmises that Shakespeare must have been impressed by ‘Hayward’s sense of how history worked, an approach closely identified at this time with the dark world-view of the Roman writer Tacitus’ (138). Thus, Shapiro cogently persuades us to read *Julius Caesar* in the context of the republican culture of the late 1590’s. Unlike Hayward, Shakespeare could not afford to risk his dramatic career by committing himself to the republican view of history. Instead, he juxtaposed a Tacitean view of history with a more conservative Plutarchian view, employing the collision between the republican and the monarchist principles to explore the possibility of a new kind of tragedy.

Another contemporary controversy relevant to *Julius Caesar*, Shapiro says, was about Elizabeth’s Accession Day, November 17. Since Elizabeth’s troops crushed the Northern Rebellion in 1569, Accession Day had been celebrated as a holiday, arousing dispute among extreme Protestants and Catholics as to the danger of mixing politics and religion. Shapiro introduces two back-to-back sermons delivered at Paul’s Cross pulpit on November 17 and 18, 1599. Hugh Holland, the first preacher, defended the government’s policy of celebrating Accession Day as a holiday (Shapiro points out that no monarch in Europe before Elizabeth
had his Accession Day celebrated as a holiday, but next day John Richardson began his Accession Day sermon with "Give unto Caesar's that which is Caesar's," implying his objection to the government's policy of mixing politics and religion. Just as Hayward was thrown in the Tower, Richardson was kept under strict surveillance after the severe interrogation by the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Bishop of London.

Shapiro draws our attention to Shakespeare's deviation from his primary source in the opening scene of *Julius Caesar*. While Plutarch's Caesar made his triumphant entry into Rome in October 45 BC, Shakespeare's Caesar returns in February 44 BC. As the play starts, Flavius, one of the tribunes, cries, "Hence! home, you idle creatures, get you home! / Is this a holiday?" (1. 1. 1-2) to the commoners who have left their daily work to see Caesar's triumphant return. Before the first scene ends, however, the other tribune makes it known that this is, after all, a holiday; "You know it is the feast of Lupercal" (1. 1. 67). By placing the opening scene of *Julius Caesar* in the religio-political milieu of 1599, Shapiro suggests the possibility that Shakespeare's Caesar tries to appropriate a Roman religious holiday for political ends when he enters the city of Rome on the festive day of Lupercal. He argues that "By locating within *Julius Caesar* a remarkably similar collision between political holiday and religious triumph, Shakespeare effectively translated a Roman issue into an Elizabethan one. No Elizabethan dramatist had ever done anything quite like this, and the audience must have been struck by how Shakespeare's retelling of this classical story seemed to speak so clearly to their moment" (191).

Perhaps Shapiro's discussion of *As You Like It* is somewhat less convincing than his discussion of the three other plays. He argues by examining two versions of *Sonnet* 138 that Shakespeare has learned by this time the vital importance, for lovers, of pretending not to see the truth. He puts a striking interpretation on the courting scenes in the Forest of Arden, contending that Orlando sees through Rosalind's disguise but pretends not to know her until the denouement. But when does Orlando know? Shapiro guesses we have the first inkling of Orlando's recognition of her in the mock marriage scene (4. 1) when Rosalind asks for Orlando's hand. He says, "It's a lot more obvious in performance, where, once Orlando takes her hand in his own, the physical reality of who she is becomes palpable to him..." (238). It seems to me that a tricky question is involved in this argument. When we see Orlando take her hand in his own, do we suppose that Orlando feels the physical reality of a female hand? Perhaps we do so in modern performances. But it is not easy to determine what the Elizabethan audience supposed became palpable to Orlando when he took her hand, because the physical reality of a boy actor's hand was there along with the theatrical reality of Rosalind's female hand. At least to me, much of the pleasure of the mock marriage scene depends upon Orlando's not knowing that "Ganymede" is his Rosalind. Sometimes in this
play the convention of disguise seems to be violated, but it never is. We smile at Duke Senior when he says to himself, "I do remember in this shepherd boy / Some lively touches of my daughter's favor" (5. 4. 26-27). That he comes very near to the truth but fails to get the truth adds greatly to our pleasure.

Shapiro's last three chapters place Hamlet at the historical moment when the culture of chivalry died and the British Empire was being born. His breathtaking investigation into the affinity between Hamlet's soliloquies and William Cornwallis's Essays best characterizes the book's method of illuminating the interrelation between Shakespeare's artistic development and the process of cultural transition English men and women witnessed in 1599. Sir William Cornwallis the younger (c. 1579–1614) was one of the many gentleman volunteers who followed Essex and were knighted by him during the Irish campaign. He returned home in the autumn in that year. DNB tells us, "whether or not he was involved in Essex's rebellion, he lived quietly for the rest of Queen Elizabeth's reign." Shapiro surmises that Cornwallis's experience in Ireland and his subsequent disillusionment made him turn to personal essay writing, in which he explored his mind overwhelmed by the conflicts between the urge for action and the consciousness of his inability to act. Five extracts from Cornwallis's Essays in this chapter sound like Hamlet's words. For example, Cornwallis's "About nothing do I suffer greater conflicts in myself than about enduring wrongs," or "It is the mind that can distil the whole world, all ages, all acts, all human knowledges within the little, little compass of a brain" (330) could be interpolated into Hamlet's soliloquies without being noticed. It is not that Shakespeare read Cornwallis's Essays nor that Cornwallis was a frequent theatregoer. They were writing independently, but they were writing from the common experience of the socio-cultural change. Shapiro argues, "Shakespeare didn't invent a new sensibility in Hamlet, rather, he gave voice to what he and others saw and felt around them – which is why Hamlet resonated so powerfully with audience from the moment it was first staged" (331). The discovery of the affinity between Hamlet's soliloquies and Cornwallis's Essays (instead of Montaigne's) is one of the best parts of this book.

The brilliant last chapter gives us a picture of the playwright in his study. Shapiro tries, by comparing the Second Quarto and First Folio versions of Hamlet, to examine what Shakespeare might have thought while revising his own play. In the first version (Q2), Shakespeare created a philosophical protagonist who has (like Cornwallis) outlived the culture of chivalric honor. His skepticism, which prevents him from taking traditional avenger's course, is most eloquently expressed in the soliloquy beginning with "How all occasions do inform against me, / And spur my dull revenge!" (4. 4. 32-33). Looking on as Fortinbras's troop marches off to Poland, Hamlet reproaches himself for inaction. What makes this soliloquy so memorable to us is Hamlet's deep-rooted skepticism about heroic actions. After
all, Fortinbras is wasting the lives of his soldiers to gain a worthless patch of ground for the honor’s sake. But Shakespeare saw, Shapiro surmises, this Cornwallis-like soliloquy derailed the plot of his revenge tragedy and decided to drop it in the revised version (F1). Likewise, Shakespeare revised Q2’s “the readiness is all, since no man, of aught he leaves, knows...” to F1’s “the readiness is all, since no man has aught of what he leaves,” with Hamlet’s emphasis shifting from “the impossibility of knowing” to “the unimportance of having” (352). Q2’s Hamlet is darker and more like an Existentialist (Dr. Johnson preferred this Hamlet) while F1’s Hamlet sounds like a character from an old-fashioned morality play (“you cannot take your property with you when you die”). However, Shakespeare chose F1’s Hamlet, again for the sake of the revenge plot. Shapiro concludes, “Only an extraordinary writer of the first order could have produced the first draft; and only a greater writer than that could have sacrificed part of that creation to better show ‘the very age and body of the time his form and pressure’” (357). Presumably, this is a conclusion slightly inconsistent with his previous discussion, because Q2’s Hamlet, rather than F1’s, seems to reflect the uncertainty and skepticism of Cornwallis and his contemporaries.

The book deals with other events more personally connected to the dramatist. Shapiro reveals how such events as the parting with Will Kemp, the Chamberlain’s Men’s popular lead clown, the death of Edmund Spenser, the best epic poet in England, and most importantly, the construction of the Globe contributed to Shakespeare’s artistic development. He sometimes writes with the novelistic techniques to conjure pictures of those events. While reading the very detailed Elizabethan process of theatre construction, we feel as if we were seeing it on the construction site (123-125). It is also exciting to see the interior of Whitehall with its rich collection of international art as Shakespeare saw it when he performed at the court (29-34). Shapiro reconstructs what Shakespeare and people around him must have experienced in this year from an impressive array of primary source materials, including various State Papers, Acts of Privy Council, traveler accounts, foreign diplomat’s observations, personal letters and diaries, all of which is well.annotated in a forty page bibliographical essay. Shapiro’s superb narrative and documentation make this book a treasure not only for historians and scholars of Elizabethan literature but for anyone who has been intrigued by the source of Shakespeare’s genius.