

A conversation with James Shapiro, author of
THE YEAR OF LEAR: Shakespeare in 1606

Q: You've written several previous books about Shakespeare. What drew you to the specific year of 1606 as the subject of your latest undertaking?

JS: I began researching *The Year of Lear* a decade ago, shortly after publishing a book about an earlier year in Shakespeare's life, 1599. That book had focused exclusively on Shakespeare's life and work towards the end of Queen Elizabeth's long reign. While writing it, I never gave much thought to what would change for Shakespeare when King James succeeded Elizabeth in 1603, and in my teaching and writing had always spoken of Shakespeare as an "Elizabethan" – though I was aware that he spent the last decade of his career as a Jacobean playwright, in a playing company patronized by the king himself.

I felt increasingly uncomfortable about this, and decided to turn my attention to those Jacobean years and explore how that might change my thinking about Shakespeare's work and its relation to his times. It helped a good deal that, at that point, the BBC asked me to help write and then present a 3-hour documentary on Shakespeare's life and times from 1603 to 1613—*Shakespeare: The King's Man* – and filming that documentary confirmed for me that 1606 was both an unusually thrilling year and an exceptionally productive one for Shakespeare himself: he finished *King Lear* that year, and went on to write two other remarkable tragedies, *Macbeth* and *Antony and Cleopatra*.

Q: Why do you think Jacobean Shakespeare has been relatively overlooked compared to the Elizabethan Shakespeare by historians and literary critics?

JS: Leaf through any biography of Shakespeare and you'll discover that there are surprisingly few pages left by the time you get to 1603 and the Jacobean Shakespeare – though so many of his greatest plays were written while Shakespeare was a "King's Man." Put another way, his biographers have had little to say about Shakespeare in his early forties, at the height of his powers. His professional life had certainly changed: the Jacobean Shakespeare wrote for an indoor playhouse (Blackfriars) as much as for the outdoor Globe, and performed a couple of hundred times at court (compared to perhaps a score or so before Elizabeth). He was also now a member of the king's household, a Groom of the Chamber. At some point during these Jacobean years he also withdrew from full-time acting. There are other notable differences, too, including the extent to which the Jacobean Shakespeare collaborated on plays with up and coming young dramatists, and the ways in which his language grew more dense and knotty. In writing *The Year of Lear* I wanted to explore how Shakespeare found his footing in writing under a new regime, one with a sharply different set of political, religious, and social concerns.

I might add that another reason why the Jacobean Shakespeare has been overshadowed by the Elizabethan one is that the charismatic Queen Bess has always attracted more attention than her successor; there must be twenty books about Elizabeth for every one about James. So *The Year of Lear* is also about giving this extraordinary moment of British culture its due: the King James Bible was being translated this year, and ships set sail in late 1606 to found the first permanent English colony in America, in Jamestown, Virginia. It's surely a time that deserves a closer look.

Q: In what way is examining Shakespeare's plays a superior way of studying the historical period he lived in?

JS: I think of the surviving historical materials and Shakespeare's plays as mutually illuminating. Both are needed to understand what *Hamlet* calls the "form and pressure" of the age. I've spent a lot of time in the archives and can say with confidence that there's much that we wish we knew that dry historical records simply don't illuminate – especially the fears and anxieties generated by the issues of the day; that's where the plays prove so useful. Even as Shakespeare's plays reveal the social and political fault-lines of his age, so do the issues with which he grappled animate his plays. One of the aims of my book, essentially a micro-history, is to recreate the interplay of the plays and the historical moment in a more patient and vivid way than either the typical history book or cradle-to-grave biography – both of which have to race over too much ground – permit.

Q: In your view, what was the most important historical event that informed Shakespeare's works in 1606?

JS: The most earthshaking event, and one that without question helped define this grim year, was the Gunpowder Plot, which had been foiled the previous November 5th. A group of disaffected Catholic gentry had tried and failed to blow up the royal family as well as the political and religious leadership of the nation while they were gathered in Parliament. In the aftermath of the devastating explosion they then planned to foment an uprising that would restore Catholicism to the land. England had never before experienced anything like it and the plot came as terrific shock to king and country. The early months of 1606 were preoccupied with the trial and public execution of the surviving plotters, who were viewed essentially as terrorists. The national obsession with the plot continued into early summer, with the capture and eventual execution of the Jesuit Henry Garnet, father of the doctrine of "Equivocation," who was singled out by the government, however unfairly, as a prime

enabler of the plot. The shockwaves of the attack register powerfully in *Macbeth*, which is about the killing of an earlier Scottish king, written and staged in the aftermath of the plot, and which perfectly captures the fraught national mood. It would also shape the reception of Shakespeare's prescient and apocalyptic tragedy, *King Lear*, performed at court in late 1606.

Q: Next year marks the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's death. You serve on the board of the Folger Shakespeare Library – in what special way will it be celebrating the Bard in 2016?

JS: The publication of *The Year of Lear* coincides with the international celebration of the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's death, an exciting year for anyone interested in Shakespeare. The Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington D.C. has been planning and working towards this anniversary for years and will be at the center of a national celebration that will reach all fifty states. There will be a touring exhibition of copies of Shakespeare's 1623 First Folio, which will visit each state for a month, around which lectures, performances, and much else have been scheduled. The Folger Library will also be hosting two other exhibitions, one that documents Shakespeare's life, the other on how Shakespeare's works have been at the center of changes in mass media. And for those who can't make it to one of the fifty local celebrations, the Folger has set up a terrific website that is well worth consulting. My hope is that as a result of all this attention to Shakespeare, tens of thousands of Americans, especially schoolchildren, will develop a life-long appreciation of his work and his influence.

Q: Is there anything you think even the most dedicated Shakespeare student will find surprising when reading your book?

JS: One of the more rewarding aspects of spending ten years researching a book is that one eventually stumbles upon new or long-overlooked stuff, material with which even the most jaded scholars are unfamiliar. For Shakespeareans interested in something absolutely new I can point to two things, both of which were unknown to me when I started researching the book. The first was how close Shakespeare's hometown was to where the Gunpowder Plot was in part planned, on property adjacent to land Shakespeare had recently rented. Moreover, an arms depot was located in a house four miles north of town, and Shakespeare's next-door neighbor was arrested while trying to convey a supply of outlawed Catholic objects to be used in the restoration of Catholicism to the land. Those interested in Shakespeare's biography may be also surprised to learn about another discovery: in late 1606 a devastating outbreak of plague reached Shakespeare's parish of St Olave's, taking the lives of his several of neighbors, including, it seems likely, his landlady and probably friend as well, Marie Mountjoy.

Q: An exciting aspect of history books and biographies is uncovering newly reported information – did you come across any new findings in your research?

JS: There are things that were discovered by others during the years that I was researching this book that I've been able to include and that are, as yet, known to very few. One in particular, discovered in a Scottish archive this past year, stands out. An anonymous writer recorded in the 1640s that Shakespeare engaged in an act of literary fellowship at the famous Tabard Inn in Southwark, an establishment favored by actors: he writes that Shakespeare 'cut' or carved his name on the wood paneling, alongside the names of Ben Jonson, his fellow actors Richard Burbage and Laurence Fletcher, and "the rest of their roistering associates in King James's time." The anecdote has made me rethink my sense of Shakespeare as a social creature. Before this I tended to share John Aubrey's view in the mid-17th century, that Shakespeare was antisocial, the kind of person who turned down invitations to carouse. When Aubrey asked those in Stratford-upon-Avon who were acquainted with the poet what they remembered about him, they told him that Shakespeare "was not a company keeper," and that he "wouldn't be debauched, and, if invited," excused himself, saying "he was in pain." Perhaps Shakespeare just didn't like to party with his rural neighbors, or he lived it up a bit more with his friends in London. It's nice to think there's at least another side to Shakespeare, that he wore his fame lightly, and was comfortable enough (in those days before selfies and framed author photos) to carve his name on the wall of a favorite hangout.

Q: What were some challenges you encountered when researching primary and secondary source materials about this year?

JS: Perhaps the greatest challenge in writing about Shakespeare in 1606 is the paucity of surviving evidence. Shakespeare kept a relatively low profile in any case, but this year he nearly disappears from view; it's the first time since 1593 that no play or poem of his was published. Happily, we can catch glimpses of him reflected in the glow of contemporary events (including his participation, in his official court role as a Groom of the Chamber, in the spectacular state visit to England of King Christian of Denmark). And enough rich source material—both historical and literary—survives to make it possible to reconstruct how Shakespeare turned his sources into such timely dramatic works. Another considerable challenge was nailing down some crucial facts. For example: for how long did plague close the playhouses in 1606? When, exactly, did Shakespeare begin writing *King Lear*? Why didn't he turn to *Antony and Cleopatra*, which is essentially a sequel, immediately

after finishing *Julius Caesar* seven years earlier? There were dozens of such questions that needed to be answered before the narrative of my book could take shape, and some of them took many months of investigation before I was comfortable with the answers.

Q: You write about how King James was curiously fascinated by the supernatural and the occult. How did this find its way into Shakespeare's work and why do you think he was inspired by it?

JS: It's hard to know, four centuries later, the extent to which Shakespeare and his contemporaries believed in witchcraft and demonic possession – both of which inform *King Lear* and *Macbeth*. My own sense is that most people at the time believed that demonic forces existed. King James himself was deeply interested in witchcraft and had even written a treatise on the subject; yet the king also prided himself in exposing those who falsely claimed to be possessed. I don't think that Shakespeare could have written a play that included witches unless there was widespread belief in their devilish powers. We can smile about such irrational beliefs today, but try persuading modern actors to say the word "Macbeth" in a theater (except, of course, during a production of the play). They won't do it and are convinced that disaster will strike anyone careless or callous enough to utter that word (and so substitute a euphemism, such as "The Scottish Play"). Even after I patiently explain to them that this so-called curse is of modern vintage, no older than the 1890s, the accidental byproduct of a practical joke in a theater review written by Max Beerbohm, they ignore my explanation and refuse to invite the curse that falls on those who utter "Macbeth." So, irrational beliefs run deep – then as now – and Shakespeare, who understood this, would make much of it in all three plays he wrote this year.

Q: You discuss several examples of how Shakespeare's use of certain words helped in the evolution of their definitions. Can you elaborate on a few of those?

JS: Words have histories. Modern readers may be surprised to learn that the word "assassination," so familiar to us today, would have been unknown in 1606, appearing for the first time in English writing in *Macbeth*, in the soliloquy in which Macbeth wrestles with killing King Duncan. Shakespeare also used everyday words as effectively as he did newfangled ones. A striking example from the plays he wrote this year is the word "nothing," a simple word that he found used a few times in his source play, *King Lear*, and which, in his hands, resounds with increasing force and irony in his own version of the story, *King Lear*.

One of the great pleasures in writing this book was tracking the ways in which Shakespeare handled key words. A word or recent coinage that was on everyone's lips in 1606 was 'equivocation.' It had been (as Shakespeare himself had used it in *Hamlet*) a neutral term that meant 'ambivalence.' But, following the discovery of Henry Garnet's Jesuitical treatise on "Equivocation," which seemed to justify lying to the authorities, the term took on much darker connotations. Shakespeare made much of this word in the Porter's scene in *Macbeth*, and it proves central to that play, which ends with Macbeth doubting "th'equivocation of the fiend, that lies like truth." It's a line that would have resonated powerfully when the play was first staged in the late spring or early summer of 1606.

Q: What do you think was Shakespeare's motivation for updating existing plays such as *King Lear* and *The Life of Antony* rather than starting from scratch?

JS: With the exception of very few plays – really just *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and to a large extent *The Tempest* – Shakespeare simply wasn't interested in inventing plots. He much preferred doing gut renovations on what others had written. We don't particularly value this today as a literary gift, but it was central to how Shakespeare worked. He had an uncanny ability to size up the work of another writer – be it an Italian novella or an older English drama – and see what was missing or left unrealized. No renovation was greater than the one Shakespeare undertook with the immediate source of his *King Lear*: an older Elizabethan play that had been on the boards since the early 1590s and had just appeared in print for the first time in the summer of 1605: *King Lear*. That play, about a king and his three daughters, had ended happily, with Lear restored to his kingdom and reconciled with his youngest daughter, Cordella. One can only imagine the experience of playgoers familiar with the story, going to see Shakespeare's bleak *King Lear* in 1606, which replaces that happy ending with what is probably the most devastating ending of any play he ever wrote. As for *Antony and Cleopatra*: critics like to point out the ways in which Shakespeare essentially plagiarized passages from North's translation of Plutarch's *Lives*; less remarked is how Shakespeare turned his source's moralizing treatment of the famous lovers inside out.

Q: You spend some time discussing the number of times the words "British" and "Britain" appear in Shakespeare's work in contrast to "English" and "England." Why is this distinction significant?

JS: One of the most striking differences between the Elizabethan and the Jacobean Shakespeare is his shift in interest from English to British concerns. During Elizabeth's reign Shakespeare wrote nine English histories, all of which anatomize English history and Englishness itself; during the reign of her successor, he wrote just one, the late romance *Henry VIII*, and never once found occasion to use the words "Britain" or "British." That changed after 1603, with the accession of the King of Scots to the English throne. James was eager to unite the kingdoms of England and Scotland (and, nominally, the other kingdoms which he claimed, Ireland, and France).

But it soon turned out that his subjects on both sides of the border were a lot less keen on Union than James himself. His efforts to enforce a Union raised troubling questions about what it really meant to be English or Scottish, or for that matter British, creating identity crises where none had been before. Exploring identity crises was, of course, grist for Shakespeare's mill, and in the course of 1606 wrote two British histories—*King Lear* and *Macbeth*, the former, famously, about the division of the kingdom.

Q: There have been claims that Shakespeare was a recusant Catholic. Do you think personal motivations played any role in how he portrayed religious tensions in his work?

JS: We don't know what Shakespeare's religious beliefs were, and the recent fling scholars have had with the "Catholic Shakespeare" has been considerably dampened by research that casts doubt on this possibility. But we do know that recusancy – the refusal to attend Protestant church services – was a particularly heated issue in 1606, and that, in the wake of the Gunpowder Plot, which had been led by recusants, hot-headed members of Parliament even proposed removing children from Catholic homes and forbidding recusants from living in London. The issue of recusancy affected Shakespeare directly this year, for his daughter Susanna refused to appear in church at Easter and receive Communion, and was called in to religious court, along with a score of others in Stratford-upon-Avon; they were all ultimately forced to give in. It was an act of a very bold 22-year old unmarried woman, and we have no idea what Shakespeare thought of his daughter's act of resistance that was as much political as religious. Nor is it easy to understand why Susanna would then marry an avowedly Protestant doctor the following year.

Sometimes issues affect what Shakespeare would not or could not write as much as what he did; after 1606 he largely steered clear of the sorts of sectarian issues that had informed plays like *Hamlet*. He also knew that after 1606 he couldn't write a play that invoked God's name or even use familiar oaths like "'swoonds" (God's wounds), for Parliament passed legislation this year fining any actor who took God's name in vain in this way. It's one of the ways that we know which plays were written before, and which after, May 1606.

Q: Did censorship prove to be problematic for Shakespeare and his contemporaries? Do you think it affected his later plays?

JS: Dramatists in the early seventeenth century had to walk a careful line between providing audiences with what they wanted – politically informed plays – and the dangers of governmental censorship, both of what was staged and what was printed. Shakespeare proved more agile at walking that line than others. He was well aware that his rivals Ben Jonson and George Chapman had been jailed the previous year for mocking the Scots in a comedy, and he saw what happened to members of a rival company who staged another politically sensitive play in 1606, *The Isle of Gulls*: they were thrown in prison that February. It was hard to know what was simply edgy and what went too far and so was deemed offensive. To give but one example: a year or so earlier Shakespeare's company had staged a play about a failed plot to kill King James while he was King of Scotland, *The Tragedy of Gowrie*. It was an immediate hit – before being shut down by the authorities, and no copies of the play survive. Shakespeare's response was to write a different and more oblique sort of play about the assassination of a Scottish king, *Macbeth*.

Q: You serve as the Shakespeare Scholar in Residence at New York's Public Theatre. What do you find most rewarding about working with actors to bring Shakespeare's words to life?

JS: Actors are incredibly keen to know everything about a play – from what words and phrases once meant, to the historical and social conditions that shaped the plays, to how they have been performed over the past 400 years. It's a great pleasure working closely with them, sharing what I have learned over the years, and I wish that there would be more bridges built between the acting and scholarly communities; both have much to learn from each other. Watching an actor like John Lithgow rehearse the part of Lear helped me hugely in understanding that role. I've especially enjoyed helping out with smaller-scale productions, closer to what existed in Shakespeare's own day – the so-called Mobile Shakespeare – that also tour local prisons, including the one housing both men and women inmates on Rikers Island. Watching those who are incarcerated respond to Shakespeare's words is an extraordinary experience, and often a haunting one.

Q: In your opinion, what was the most lasting impact of Shakespeare's plays in 1606?

JS: The plays have lasted and will continue to flourish in what Shakespeare described in *Julius Caesar* as "states unborn and accents yet unknown" because they speak to things that continue to matter. In a culture as divided as our own, Shakespeare's plays remain common ground. When I recently heard snatches of *Macbeth* quoted in that brilliant new American drama *Hamilton*, it reminded me that these plays have entered our hearts, minds, and language, and four centuries after they were first spoken, continue to shape how we make sense of the world. But to fully grasp the timelessness of the plays, we also need to understand their timeliness, the ways in which they were a product of their fraught moment, and urgent to Jacobean audiences who flocked to see them.