

VOLUME XVI, NUMBER 3, SUMMER 2016

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A Journal of Political Thought and Statesmanship

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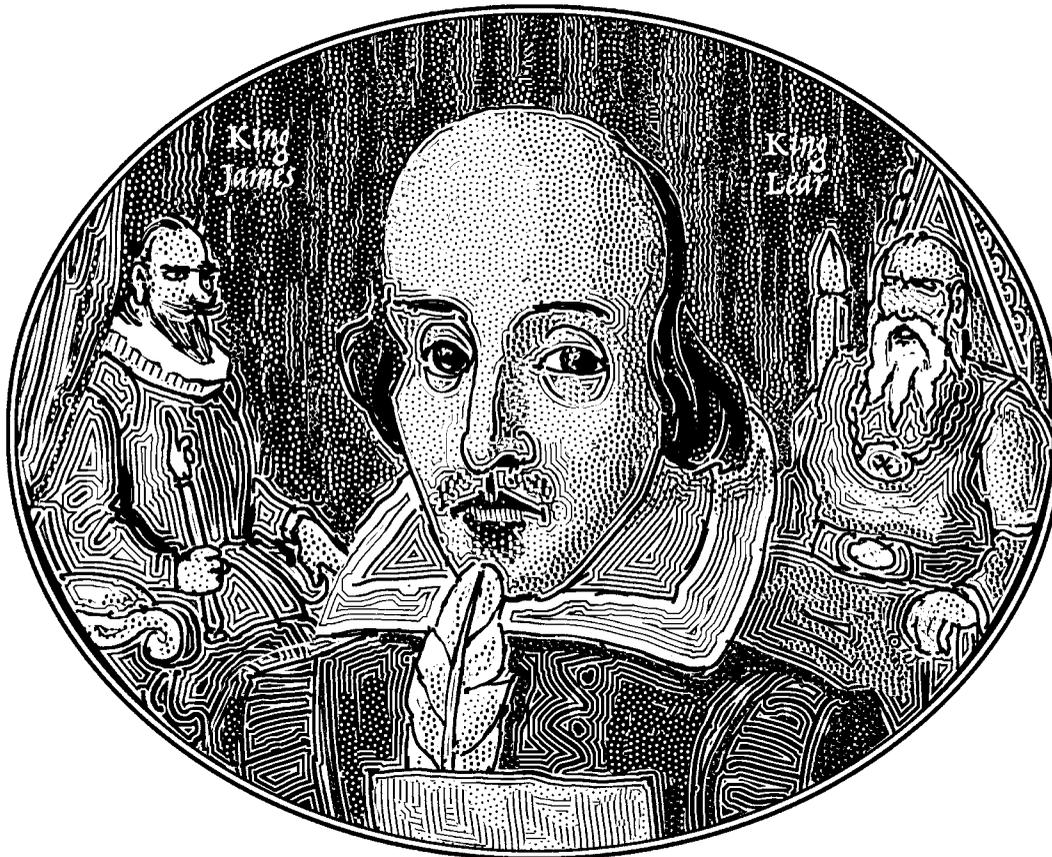
PRICE: \$6.95

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Book Review by Rafael Major

It Was a Very Good Year

The Year of Lear, by James Shapiro.
Simon & Schuster, 384 pages, \$30



In May 1901, Manhattan theatergoers arrived at the People's Theater on the Bowery, and cabs and carriages were lined up to the end of the block. As expected, patrons were fashionably dressed, but there was something different about this crowd, and the *New York Times* reporter sent to review the play was surprised that "the audience resembled a big family party." It was the premier and groundbreaking performance of a Yiddish adaptation of Shakespeare entitled, *The Jewish King Lear*. This same production eventually caused one anguished member of the audience to run down the narrow aisle toward the stage screaming, "To hell with your stingy daughter...spit on her...and come with me. My wife will feed you. Come, may she choke, that rotten daughter of yours!" The sight of a well-intentioned father who gave his children wealth and independence only to be betrayed by them was too much. The sight of shameless human greed had provoked raw compassion.

According to James Shapiro, Shakespeare's success was due to his knowledge that "plays best please when rooted in what audiences long for or dread; people tend to weep at tragedies because they are mourning their own real or imagined losses." Shapiro is Larry Miller Professor of English at Columbia University and a prominent Shakespeare scholar. His *The Year of Lear: Shakespeare in 1606* is an exhaustive analysis of a single year in the Bard's life, and especially of the social and political aftershocks of the Gunpowder Plot—the failed assassination of the king the year before—as they might be related to Shakespeare's writing. There is certainly something to Shapiro's approach. It is likely, for example, that Lear's division of his kingdom in the opening scene of *Lear* would have had a special resonance during the controversy over the unification of Britain, which arose with the accession of James VI of Scotland to the English throne as James I. Unification was the most pressing issue facing King

James and Parliament, and the religious divisions underlying the Gunpowder Plot made the question of unification all the more urgent for both Protestants and Catholics. Ordinary citizens of London would have been inundated with pamphlets and sermons arguing for and against the king's plan to rule over the entire "sceptered isle." It is hard to imagine an Englishman or Scotsman in 1606 who had not yet considered the possibility of becoming British for the first time. The first time a Shakespearean character speaks the word "British," according to Shapiro, is in *King Lear* (and it occurs there three times). Several such coincidences noted in *The Year of Lear* make a persuasive case that Shakespeare was reflecting on contemporary events and issues when he penned his most tragic play. But there are limits to this way of understanding an author, and Shapiro exhibits these limits especially in the last third of his book, where he turns from an extensive historical study of 1606 and textual analysis of

Lear to interpretations of *Macbeth* and *Antony and Cleopatra*. Neither of these interpretations is carried out with the thoroughness applied to *Lear*, and the connections Shapiro makes between these plays and the year 1606 are less satisfying—so unsatisfying, in fact, that they raise questions about Shapiro’s entire approach.

The risk in using biography and historical events to interpret Shakespeare is the inevitable necessity to proceed by isolated fact, supposition, “imaginative labor,” enlisting or dismissing anecdotes (when convenient), until finally...the logical scaffolding begins to buckle. Shapiro contends, for example, that “Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* was written not for posterity but for contemporaries like Matthew Banks and his fellow carpenters” experiencing the deep cultural anxieties set in motion by the Gunpowder plot. There are hundreds of anecdotes about Abraham Lincoln’s reading of Shakespeare—and scores of them involve *Macbeth*—but it takes little imaginative labor to imagine he would be puzzled by Shapiro’s contention.

Was the power of *Macbeth* diminished for Lincoln because he was unaware that Matthew Banks and his fellow carpenters were fans of Shakespeare? Will *Macbeth* become more terrifying for future generations now that we are reminded that many Londoners were troubled by the possibility of demonic activity in 1606? The assertion that *Macbeth* was written for contemporary carpenters is an isolated exaggeration, but it is exaggerations like this that led an exasperated Rudyard Kipling to speculate that the conversation of a “half-tipsy sailor” would be enough raw material for a genius like Shakespeare to write the entire *Tempest*. The events that occurred in 1606 are interesting to think about, but maybe the usefulness of historical speculation is limited when reading an author like Shakespeare.

On the other hand, as Shapiro shows at length, there is irrefutable evidence that the sources of *King Lear* likely include an earlier English play entitled *King Leir*; Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *History of the Kings of Britain*,

Raphael Holinshed’s *Chronicles*, and Philip Sidney’s *Arcadia*. These sources also contain stories of a united kingdom’s division and a king’s betrayal at the hands of his children. Take Holinshed’s *Chronicles* for example: “Leir the sonne of Baldud, was admitted ruler over the Britaines, in the yeere of the world 3105 [approx. 800 B.C.], at what time Ioas rained as yet in Iuda.” In this older version published in 1577, Leir overcomes the unkindness and unnaturalness of his daughters Gonorilla and Regan.

But the mention of the reign of Joas of Judea reminds readers of something more fundamental than the events of 800 B.C., or 1577, or 1606. All of human history is filled with moments when the possibilities of a settled or united political life seem to be in reach, only to be destroyed by divisions and internal faction. Shapiro would have his readers believe that plays like *Lear* and *Macbeth* succeeded because they appealed to the real and imagined longings of Shakespeare’s contemporaries. This must be partially true, but were the longings of human beings in 1606 so different from our longings in 2016?

Despite reservations about Shapiro’s eagerness to narrow the importance and appeal of these plays to a single year, there is much to learn in this volume about the activity of reading and attempting to interpret Shakespeare. Unlike many scholarly analysts of Shakespeare sources, Shapiro does not attempt to use likely sources as shortcuts for interpreting the plays. In the case of *Lear*, *Macbeth*, and *Antony and Cleopatra* he emphasizes Shakespeare’s manipulation of source material as a way of isolating authorial choices. The advantage of this approach is the prospect of getting a real sense of Shakespeare’s own activity as a dramatist, rather than speculating about biographical and historical connections.

The real highlight—albeit only a subplot—in *The Year of Lear* is Shapiro’s awareness of the importance of the issue of censorship. It was in 1605 that officers of the crown discovered a clandestine volume entitled *A Treatise*

of *Equivocation*. The discovery of the *Treatise* caused a sensation because it was a handbook for readers who desired to lie under oath, “concealing the truth by saying one thing while deceptively thinking another.” The discovery of “equivocation” in 1606 was scandalous because it meant that it is impossible for authorities to identify dangerous citizens and their subversive thoughts. According to one official, if it were possible to say or write things that are able to deceive honest people “it would supplant all justice.”

The existence of a phenomenon like equivocation is important for reading Shakespeare because he “had been employing this device in his plays and poems long before he or his culture had settled on a name for it.” If this is true, it explains why Shakespeare alone, among his fellow playwrights, was able to avoid legal trouble throughout his entire career. As Shapiro repeatedly points out, this ability to avoid official censure was not the result of the poet’s intellectual conformity with contemporary moral, political, and theological views. It is true that the equivocations of Shakespeare’s characters are sometimes playful, but they are sometimes subversive “in the most cunning and destructive ways imaginable.”

If Shapiro is correct about this facet of Shakespeare’s art of writing, it would also help explain why he continues to attract audiences who have little or no knowledge of the historical circumstances of his life. Jacobean carpenters, Abraham Lincoln, Jewish immigrants to America, and readers of this journal all have a keen interest in understanding Shakespeare’s power to move them because Shakespeare was concerned with the kinds of questions that have always fascinated human beings—even if those questions had been forbidden by the authorities and unnoticed by almost everyone in the audience who first watched *King Lear*.

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