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**James Shapiro, *1606: William Shakespeare and The Year of Lear*, hardback, 423 pages, London: Faber and Faber, 2015. ISBN: 978-0-571-23578-0; £20.**

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London bulks large in James Shapiro's *1606: William Shakespeare and The Year of Lear*, as it did in his previous book *1599: A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare* (2005). But there are marked differences between the capital in which Shakespeare lived and worked just before the turn of the century and the one in which he lived and worked seven years later. London in 1606 was Jacobean rather than Elizabethan; a married Scotsman with two sons and a daughter rather than a single Englishwoman with no children sat on the throne in a city where 35 years before (according to the 1571 census of aliens) only 40 Scots had been living, so that few Londoners had experience of Scots people; and, above all, it was a London stalked by the spectre of the Gunpowder Plot, the abortive attempt to blow up the Houses of Parliament on 5 November 1605 that created a 'culture of suspicion' in the capital and elsewhere—in Stratford-upon-Avon, for example (229). Shapiro evokes the enormity of the disaster if the plot had not been foiled on the eve of its enactment:

the damage done the following day when Parliament was in session would have been catastrophic, almost unimaginable: the entire leadership of England, from King James, Queen Anne and Princes Henry and Charles, to the nobility and political representatives and heads of the Church gathered there from every corner of the land would have been wiped out in a single blow. (108–9)

The blow's impact would not have stopped at the precincts of Parliament; the explosion and ensuing fires would have spread out across Westminster, ravaging buildings and killing many more people. And beyond the toll of death and damage there could have been, as Bishop William Barlow told his hearers at St Paul's Cross on the Sunday after the attempted attack, an ultimately greater impact resulting in a

breakdown of civil society and a country left vulnerable to foreign invasion and conquest.

As Shapiro stresses, however, it is the fact that '*nothing happened*' which 'sets the Gunpowder Plot apart from subsequent infamous terrorist plots (especially those also significant enough to be remembered by their date)' (119, italics original). He gives no examples, other than 5 November, of terrorist plots remembered by their dates, but 9/11 and (particularly in the London context) 7/7 come at once to mind. The thwarting of the Gunpowder Plot meant that its consequences had to be imagined and could be shaped by government propagandists in ways that would confirm and reinforce the existing regime—though, as dramatists were already aware, it was risky to imagine the death of a king, even in order to deplore it. But while the results of London exploding required work on imaginary forces, the results for the plotters of conspiring to do so were plain for Londoners to see in 1606, in sadistic and spectacular punishments which combined hanging, castration, disembowelment, decapitation and quartering, and in the display of body parts over London gates and of heads on London Bridge. Shapiro exaggerates for dramatic effect when he claims that it 'would be hard to find many individuals in Jacobean England more intricately linked than [Shakespeare] was to those whose lives were touched by the Gunpowder Plot' (135), which also had significant support among people he knew in Warwickshire. But it is a reasonable conjecture that Shakespeare was a little too close for his own comfort to the conspirators and their sympathisers.

Other events besides the fallout from the failed Plot marked 1606. For example, Star Chamber investigated a case of fraudulent demonic possession in a witch-hunt atmosphere; for the first time in living memory, a foreign monarch, James's brother-in-law, King Christian IV of Denmark, made a state visit to England; plague struck lethally in London from late July to late autumn; actors were jailed for seditious drama and Parliament passed a law forbidding profanity on stage; James I tried, unsuccessfully, to persuade Parliament to approve an act of Union between England and Scotland; the Union Jack was devised and displayed on a flagpole for the first time; and, in December, ships sailed from London dock to found the first enduring American colony at Jamestown.

In this mêlée of events, Shakespeare gives us the slip, leaving hardly a rack behind. Shapiro is aware of the sparseness of the 'surviving shards' of Shakespeare's life (332), but he makes biographical claims ranging from the modest to the immoderate. As he points out, Shakespeare turned 42 in 1606, in an era when the average lifespan stretched only to the mid-forties, which we may reasonably suppose made the grave gape more closely for him in that year than it had done in 1599. Shapiro also ventures some imaginative reconstructions, for example when (going slightly further back than 1606), he observes that in 1605, John Wright's bookshop started to sell copies of an anonymous play that had been staged in the 1590s but had only recently been printed: *The True Chronicle History of King Leir*. We know that in 1605 Shakespeare was living on the corner of Silver Street and Muggle Street in Cripplegate—Charles Nicholl has explored his residence there in his fascinating book *The Lodger* (2007)—and Shapiro imagines Shakespeare's short walk from his lodgings to Wright's bookshop to buy a copy of *Leir*:

Crossing Silver Street, Shakespeare would have passed his parish church, St Olave's, before heading south down Noble Street toward St Paul's Cathedral, passing Goldsmiths' Hall as Noble Street turned into Foster Lane, emerging onto the busy thoroughfare of Cheapside. With Cheapside Cross to his left, and St Paul's and beyond it the Thames directly ahead, Shakespeare would have turned west, passing St Martin's Lane and then the Shambles, home to London's butchers. Christ Church was now in sight, and just beyond it Wright's shop, abutting Newgate market. (17–18)

It makes you feel like taking the walk yourself (or perhaps some enterprising guide already offers one), seeing yourself in doublet and hose on the way to buy the play that you will radically and rapidly revise to produce your much better version, *King Lear*. Of course, Shakespeare might have taken a different route, bought the play on the way home, or borrowed it from a friend. But it is a harmless enough way of bringing Shakespeare to life, like a page from a pop-up book for adults.

More methodologically and logically suspect is the kind of claim Shapiro makes about Shakespeare's attendance at the masque *Hymenaei* [*Marriage Rites*], written by Ben Jonson and designed by Inigo Jones, which was staged to celebrate the marriage of Robert Devereux, third Earl of Essex, and Frances Howard, in the presence of King James I at the Banqueting House in Whitehall on 5 January 1606. Shapiro contends that 'We can tell from the impact this masque had on his subsequent work that Shakespeare had secured for himself a place in the room that January evening' (3). This is on a continuum with one of the main arguments of the anti-Stratfordians whom Shapiro challenges in his *Contested Will: Who Wrote Shakespeare?* (2010), an argument that says, in effect, that we can tell from the impact it had on his work that 'Shakespeare' must have secured a place in great councils of state and that therefore he must have been a nobleman. If we accept that Shakespeare might have combined his imagination with the fruits of reading and conversation to produce convincing dramatisations of high-level political discussion without having actually been privy to it, we could also suggest that he might have done something similar to produce masque-like material in his plays without having had to attend a specific masque, or indeed any masque at all.

Shapiro goes on to assert that Shakespeare, 'had he been invited' to write the 5 January masque at which he was supposedly present, 'would have said no' (5). This leads to more general claims:

That Shakespeare never accepted such a commission tells us as much about him as a writer as the plays he left behind. There was a price to be paid for writing masques, which were shamelessly sycophantic and propagandist, compromises he didn't care to make. He must have also recognised that it was an elite and evanescent art form that didn't suit his interests or his talents. (5)

This constructs an undoubtedly appealing image of Shakespeare as an artist of integrity, refusing commissions that would have compromised his art. But is there any evidence that he was ever offered such a commission or that he ever refused one? Perhaps he was never asked. Shapiro develops his image of the dedicated artist by supposing that Shakespeare shunned the post-masque eating and drinking on 5

January 1606: 'By then, I suspect, Shakespeare was already back at his lodgings, doing what he had been doing well into the night for over fifteen years: writing' (5). The 'I suspect' is a saving grace here, signalling that Shapiro is engaged in speculation rather than relating verifiable fact; but too often in 1606 the attempts to conjure Shakespeare are compromised intellectually by a sleight of hand that hurriedly passes over the rents in the fabric of illusion.

In this period, Shakespeare wrote three major tragedies: *Lear*, *Macbeth* and *Antony and Cleopatra*. Shapiro links these to contemporary events by a mixture of loose analogy and small-scale linguistic echo. Shakespeare, he tells us folksily, 'didn't wait long to locate *King Lear* within [the] ongoing debate' (47), in the early Jacobean era, about whether England and Scotland should unite more firmly:

King James's warning about 'dividing your kingdoms' is closely echoed in the opening lines of *King Lear* in Gloucester's remark about the 'division of the kingdoms' [1.4, *The History of King Lear: The Quarto Text*, Oxford Shakespeare, 1988]. The contemporaneous feel of the beginning of Shakespeare's play is reinforced in Kent's first words: 'I thought the King had more affected the Duke of Albany than Cornwall' [1.1-2]. Jacobean playgoers knew that King James's elder son, Henry, was the current Duke of Albany, and his younger one, Charles, the Duke of Cornwall—and, in fact, James did prefer Henry over his sickly younger brother. To speak of Albany was to speak of Scotland (James himself had previously been Duke of Albany, as had his father). (47-8)

It is interesting to make these connections and possible to speculate that 'Jacobean playgoers knew' them. But Shapiro offers no substantive documentary evidence (other than circular inferences from the texts of the plays themselves) that they did so and, moreover, he assumes that 'Jacobean playgoers' were a homogeneous mass who would have had roughly the same degree and kind of knowledge and would have applied it in the same ways to the plays they saw.

Similarly, Shapiro connects the 1606 plague to Lear's verbal abuse of Goneril as 'A plague-sore, an embossed carbuncle / In my corrupted blood' (7.382-3) and to the response of the soldier Scarus in *Antony and Cleopatra* to Enobarbus's question 'How appears the fight?': 'On our side like the tokened pestilence, / Where death is sure' (3.10.8-10, Oxford Shakespeare, 1988). Shapiro claims: 'For playgoers in 1606, all too familiar with plague sores and God's tokens, these terrifying images were more than metaphorical and more terrifying than they can ever be for us' (323). It is of course essential in literary interpretation to emphasise that words and imagery may bear different weights in different historical contexts; but it is dubious to assert, in relation to Shakespeare, that all contemporary playgoers would have noticed or interpreted them in the same way and difficult to gauge accurately the proportionate importance they may have had—would they have stood out in the tumult of references to other matters in the play as it unfolded on stage? With the plague references as with the political ones, we could argue that it is twenty-first-century playgoers, primed by critics like Shapiro, who would find them salient in a way that Shakespeare's contemporary audiences might not have done. The main point is that

we know very little about the responses of Jacobean audiences and can only make inferences through the prisms of modern scholarship and criticism.

*1606* largely blanks out these prisms. It gives little idea of the debates and controversies that have challenged and changed Shakespeare studies in the later twentieth and early twenty-first century. While it can be reminiscent of new historicist criticism, especially the work of Stephen Greenblatt, it makes it look much like the old empiricism. Insofar as it has a conception of Shakespeare's plays, it is a distinctly old-fashioned one that would be unexceptionable to the Romantics and the Victorians, for instance when it asserts: 'Each Shakespeare play has its own distinctive music and, not unlike a symphony, its themes are established at the outset' (60).

*1606* also tends to elide the possible conceptual and experiential differences that we may posit between the early modern 'mind' (not of course a homogeneous entity) and the 'mind' of the later twentieth and twenty-first centuries; to diminish all the ways in which the Elizabethans and Jacobean might have been not only unlike each other, but, even more, unlike us: to subdue the potential sheer strangeness of those remote cultural moments. Despite his reiterated cautions about lack of evidence and the circularity of making inferences about Shakespeare's emotional life from the plays and poems attributed to him, Shapiro's cognitive confidence can be overweening. While he emphasises the 'considerable effort and imaginative labour' necessary 'to travel back in time four centuries and immerse ourselves in the hopes and fears of that moment' (16), he nonetheless produces an easily recognisable world. *1606* is a highly readable and rather reassuring book that evokes some vivid images of London life in the Jacobean era and provides interesting syntheses of some recent critical interpretations of the plays it discusses, but it offers no challenges. Shapiro's Shakespeare resembles the Bard in the *Twilight Zone* episode whom an aspiring TV writer summons from the early modern era to write his scripts, a familiar compound ghost fashioned from scraps of cultural stereotypes whose benign hauntings assure us that the time is not out of joint, that there is no need to set it right and that, for the Bard, it is business as usual.

### **Note on Contributor**

**Nicolas Tredell** is a freelance writer who has published on authors ranging from Shakespeare to Martin Amis. He is Consultant Editor of Palgrave Macmillan's Essential Criticism series and formerly taught at Sussex University, UK. His recent books include *C. P. Snow: The Dynamics of Hope* (2012), *Analysing Texts: David Copperfield and Great Expectations* (2013) and *Shakespeare—The Tragedies* (2014). New and updated editions of *Novels to Some Purpose*, his study of Colin Wilson's fiction, and *Conversations with Critics*, his interviews with twenty leading writers, will appear this year.

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