



A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare

By James Shapiro
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Introduction

James Shapiro takes on the "romantic myth" of Shakespeare's timelessness and universality, and through a scholarly and entertaining deep look into one year of Shakespeare's life, gives the reader a wonderfully rich reading of what made up the time, the man, and the work. Shapiro's understanding of the period is immense and passionate, and he opens up the methods and influences behind some of Shakespeare's greatest plays. It's a highly readable narrative; every page contains insights and interpretations that will change any conventional reading of Shakespeare. This is that too-rare kind of scholarship that is a delight to read, genuinely serious and fun. As Shapiro makes clear, Shakespeare was very much a man of his time and place. And what we make of Hamlet now is not what Elizabethan audiences made of him. Hamlet's cultural significance has completely shifted. This great character expresses the change that was taking place in 1599, in Britain and in Shakespeare's mind, away from a chivalric code of honor and toward a society and people motivated by more modern concerns. Shapiro

is a true master at interpreting this historical and cultural moment in a way that can only deepen and enlarge any Shakespeare reader's enjoyment of the plays.

Questions for Discussion

1. Did this book fundamentally shift your understanding of any of the plays that Shapiro discusses? In what ways?
2. How did the Globe Theater influence Shakespeare's development as a writer?
3. After reading this book, would you say that there are points in these plays that are not as true or as accurate in our time as they were in 1599?
4. In his preface, Shapiro quotes Ben Jonson's famous line that Shakespeare is "not of an age but for all time." Must a writer have universal significance in order to be judged as great? If at least some of Shakespeare's characters and language are not universal or timeless in their meaning, how else might his greatness be determined?
5. As Shapiro repeatedly points out, very little is known about Shakespeare as a man, or about how he felt or lived his life. In your opinion, how well does Shapiro do at creating an insightful portrait of this writer about whom we really know so little?
6. The idea of marrying for love was new and fairly radical. As Shapiro interestingly notes, the understanding of what constitutes an "individual" was quite different. In a play such as *As You Like It*, how would these major differences have changed the ways in which audiences then and now respond to the play?
7. Why might the actor Will Kemp and his famous "jigs" have been an obstacle to Shakespeare's development as a writer?
8. Discuss Hamlet's famous "to be or not to be" soliloquy. How does Shapiro's delineation of this play's evolution change your understanding of this moment of Hamlet's dilemma? What is it about Hamlet that makes him so powerful as a modern hero, and how might Elizabethan audiences have seen him differently?
9. Shapiro sees some of the qualities of Jacques (*As You Like It*) more fully developed in the later Hamlet. How would such a character type be changed by moving him from a comedy to a tragedy? What traits to Jacques and Hamlet share?
10. If you could travel back in time to be at the Globe and see one of Shakespeare's plays performed, which one would it be, and why?

About the Author

James Shapiro is professor of English at Columbia University. He has written several scholarly books on Shakespeare. He lives in New York City.