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By Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence
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Shakespeare in a Divided America

Shapiro, James. ***Shakespeare in a Divided America: What His Plays Tell Us About Our Past and Future.*** (New York: Penguin Books, 2021).

Tina Turner asked "what's love got to do with it?", a question whose answer many still await, for, as Bottom says in ***A Midsummer Night's Dream,*** "To say the truth, reason and love keep little company together nowadays" (3.1.143-144). [1] Bottom spoke of matters of the heart, but in America today one could say the same about things cultural and political, for as Ophelia says in ***Hamlet***, "Lord, we know what we are, but know not what we may be" (4.5, 43-44). [2]

Although it is clear that our clashing cultural jousts portend a murky future, I'm tempted to say to Ophelia, that "we might not even know what we are."

Seeking insights and, could one dare to hope, answers into our culturally clashing times, one might paraphrase Tina and ask James Shapiro "What's Shakespeare got to do with it?"

But, if you do, be prepared.

In ***Shakespeare In a Divided America: What His Plays Tell Us About Our Past and Future***, Shapiro has a lot to say as he out-Hotspurs Hotspur ‘shaming the devil by telling the truth’. [3] The truth he tells is about America’s contested identity as revealed by its two-plus centuries on-again, off-again and on-again love affair with all things Shakespearean. More to the point, he explores the light that relationship sheds on such troublesome issues as miscegenation, manifest destiny, class warfare, assassination, immigration, marriage, adultery, same-sex love, and politics left and right, for, like York in ***Richard II***, we know not “how or which way to order these affairs/Thus disorderly thrust into (our) hands” (2.2, 108-109). [4]

A prolific author, James Shapiro is Columbia University’s Larry Miller Professor of English and Comparative Literature. [5] While an aesthetician with a keen eye for the plays’ theatricality and a keen ear for their language, Shapiro primarily takes a historicist’s approach to understanding Shakespeare. In works such as ***1599: A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare**, **Contested Will: Who Wrote Shakespeare**, **The Year of Lear: Shakespeare in 1606*** *and the* ***Library of America*** *anthology he edited,* ***Shakespeare in America: An Anthology from the Revolution to Now,*** he grounds both Shakespeare and his texts in the cultural stew within which they were composed and in which they were and still are performed.

In the process, he demonstrates that the plays were not created *sui generis*, that is a thing unto themselves, but, in fact, although unabashedly commercial, were sensitive and nuanced reflections of the cultural, political and religious milieu of their times. Similarly, later productions were not simply re-staging’s of “classics,” however one defines that term, but sometimes subtle, sometimes not so subtle, commentaries on the societal values and issues of the day determining which plays were performed, who was permitted to act in them and how audiences reacted to them. Which brings us to Shakespeare in America and Americans’ long fascination with the Bard-of-Avon, for as Shapiro says, “Read by almost everyone at school, staged in theaters across the land, and long valued by conservatives as highly as liberals, Shakespeare’s plays remain a common ground, one of the few places where Americans can meet and air their disparate views.” [6]

How did it happen that Shakespeare’s plays became that “common ground,” or at least one of the more prominent terrains, upon which Americans vent their political and cultural differences demonstrating, as any evening spent watching cable “news” or the most recent Congressional testimony verifies, that Americans practicing their small (d)emocratic politics can be described like the mob in ***Julius Caesar*** “O judgement, thou art fled to brutish beasts/And men have lost their reason” (3.2, 104-105)?" [7] As Shapiro says, “. . . much of the mystery of ‘Why America embraced Shakespeare?’ remains unsolved,” [8] but embrace Shakespeare America did. From the late 18th century through the 19th century, when fascination with Shakespeare was at its zenith, into the 20th century, which ended with the film ***Shakespeare In Love*** winning the 71st Academy Award as *Best Picture,* and into the 21st century with a black-and-white, modern dress version of ***Much Ado About Nothing*** a minor film hit in 2012 and a 2017 staging of ***Julius Caesar*** causing a political ruckus in right-wing media, Shakespeare is very much with us. Why Shakespeare and not someone else, like, say, Ben Jonson or Christopher Marlowe, or, if it’s an American one wants, then why not Tennessee Williams or Eugene O’Neill, the only American playwrights who remotely approach Shakespeare’s stature?

Well, setting aesthetics aside and simplifying a bit, there are probably two reasons. First, Shakespeare won over American audiences in the 19th century because of a combination of circumstances. In a frontier society, there were few rivals for theatrical entertainment. His plays provided a ready-made canon for theatrical productions and touring British acting companies provided the rest. Quotations from his plays' famous speeches dominated schoolbooks, such as ***McGuffey's Eclectic Reader***, which sold over 120 million copies in the 19th century, and, as Shapiro points out, every home had two books – a copy of the King James Bible and Shakespeare's works. [9] Shapiro notes Alexis de Tocqueville, who first picked up a copy of ***Henry V*** in an American log cabin, and quotes German writer Karl Knortz, who "said of America that 'there is certainly no land on the whole earth in which Shakespeare and the Bible are held in such high esteem.'" [10] As Shapiro points out, Shakespeare's Elizabethan language echoed the King James Bible and became a sort of secular scripture from which speakers could pluck lines upon which to orate. [11]

The second reason Americans embraced Shakespeare in the 19th century was that would be orators, readers and playgoers found that his anxieties resonated with their fears, for their chief political and cultural worries dovetailed with those Shakespeare wrote about in the late 16th century. In fact, in a kind of "more things change, the more they remain the same" phenomenon, they are the anxieties bedeviling 21st century Americans: "the dangers of autocratic rule; the imagined threat posed by those of different races, religions, or nationalities; the slippery boundaries of gender." [12] Common to all of these issues are the questions "Who am I?" "Who are we?" and, echoing Ophelia, "Who will we be?" as Americans seek to avoid Richard II's fate, who said of himself "Thus I play in one person many people/And none contented" (5.5, 31-32). [13]

Much of our discontent, as it also does in Shakespeare, results from mistaken identities and defining community by who is excluded. And that exclusion is two-part. In Shakespeare's plays, as Shapiro points out, many end with community restored, but that restoration hinges on who is excluded, e.g. Malvolio in ***Twelfth Night*** and Shylock in ***The Merchant of Venice.*** In America, that exclusion is defined by who gets to act in Shakespeare, whether it is the great 19th century American actress Charlotte Cushman, a gay woman who played Romeo better than any male, or Tom Fukunaga, the main character in Toshio Mori's short story "The School Boy Hamlet," a Japanese-American youth interned during World War II who yearns to play Hamlet on Broadway but does not realize, as do the others in 1940s America, that no one who looks like him will be permitted to play Hamlet on Broadway. [14] As I have explored at length in my ***The American Tapestry Project,*** in particular the warp thread "Freedom's Faultlines: Tales of Race and Gender," American identity has been defined from the beginning by what one is ***not*** – an Indigenous Person, an enslaved person of color, a woman. As Shapiro notes, "we define ourselves against those whom we reject, keep out, or lock up." [15]

Understanding the accuracy of that observation, as Steve Provizer notes in ***The Arts Fuse-Boston's Online Arts Magazine,*** throughout American history culture warriors on either side of an issue, appreciating the Bard's cross-cultural appeal, "have used his work as a way to try to exert influence at crucial political and cultural junctures." [16] This began as long ago as the spat between John Quincy Adams and the actress Fanny Kemble about ***Othello*** and mixed marriages and as recently as the Delacorte Theater's "Shakespeare-in-the-Park" 2017 production of ***Julius Caesar*** in which a suspiciously Trumpian-looking

Caesar is, of course, assassinated. Shapiro traces all of this out in eight chapters, each dedicated to a year and an instance in American history when besotted partisans on either side of a contentious issue's rising tempers could have earned them the rebuke Hector gave to Troilus and Paris in ***Troilus and Cressida*** "The reasons you allege do more conduce/To the hot passion of distempered blood/Than to make up a free (unbiased) determination/'Twixt right and wrong" (2.2., 68-171). [17]

An immensely readable book, Shapiro travels from 1833 when at a dinner party former President John Quincy Adams let slip a racist comment to his dinner table partner, Fanny Kemble, the renowned British actress, about the hideousness of ***Othello*** in which a white woman marries a Black man. From Adams' point-of-view, Desdemona got what she deserved and in so commenting revealed that it was possible, as Frederick Douglass could have told you, to be an abolitionist and a racist at the same time.

From there, Shapiro moves to 1845, the Mexican War, Manifest Destiny and conflicting notions of manliness. The conflict was between the post-colonial emerging gentility of early 19th century "Eastern men" softening their rough edges in an increasingly refined culture and the macho-toughness of the frontier westerner who had the strength and resoluteness to accept and fight for America's "manifest destiny" to rule a continent. Shapiro examines this tension in the exotic anecdote of a young Ulysses S. Grant cast as Desdemona in a performance of ***Othello*** at an American military base along the Mexican border. The gender bending notion of a man playing a woman, although the rule in the Elizabethan theater, was a novelty of dubious virtue in the American west. The performance was cancelled and Grant grew a beard to assert his masculinity.

Shapiro pairs this with its reverse in the story of Charlotte Cushman, arguably the greatest actress of the 19th century, who made playing Romeo her signature role. Foreshadowing the gender fluidity of 21st century America, the role of Romeo in ***Romeo and Juliet*** has always presented challenges for male actors, for Romeo has both feminine and masculine sides to his character. He can both fight angry duels and then pivot and speak of love that it ". . . is a smoke made with the fume of sighs/Being purged, a fire sparkling in lover's eyes/Being vexed, a sea nourished with lovers' tears" (1.1, 190-192). [18] As a result, in mid-19th century America when the image of the rough and ready western male swamped the softening Eastern male, no male actor could risk his reputation playing Romeo. An unapologetically gay woman, Cushman, a discreet and culturally savvy person who understood the conventions of her time and the unease a woman embracing another woman on stage created, nonetheless embraced the role of Romeo navigating the soft edge of his dual personality with such skill that critics and playgoers wondered "what happens to masculinity when a woman can so convincingly play a man." [19]

In his chapter "1849: Class Warfare," Shapiro continues his examination of male identity in the feud between English actor William Macready and American actor Edwin Forrest. The feud culminated in the Astor Place Opera House Riot of 1849 at a performance of ***Macbeth*** in which three issues boiled over. First, a continuation of arguments about what constitutes appropriate "maleness" – Macready's refined English sensibility or Forrest's American "rough and readiness"; second, class warfare between the elites in the box seats, the common folk in the lower level, and the urban poor, Blacks and prostitutes in the balcony. The theater, like sporting venues and theaters today, were the only places all classes of Americans intermingled; think of Browns Stadium or Heinz Field with their luxury loges, box seats, cheap upper-deck and end zone seats and the latent class distinction on display. The play was disrupted and the resulting melee spilled out into the streets, where over 10,000 people had congregated to protest Macready's appearance. In the ensuing riot, Blacks were targeted at a meeting of the American Anti-Slavery Society attended by Frederick Douglass, who was pelted with debris attempting to enter the meeting. Twenty people were killed, hundreds more injured and peace was only restored when the New York State militia suppressed the violence by firing on the crowd. [20]

In "1865: Assassination," Shapiro contrasts two ways of reading Shakespeare: John Wilkes Booth's, who found in ***Julius Caesar***, ***Macbeth*** and other roles justification for killing a President he thought a tyrant and Abraham Lincoln's, who found in ***Macbeth*** not a tyrant's justification but a meditation on the obligations of leadership in Macbeth's guilty musings about his duty to Duncan he had violated. In "1948: Marriage," Shapiro shows how the revival of Shakespeare's ***The Taming of the Shrew*** and its reincarnation ***Kiss Me, Kate*** first as a Broadway hit and then as a Hollywood movie illuminates America's ongoing gender role confusion as the sexes vie for superiority of place. Coming during the lull in women's rights activity after passage of the 20th Amendment in 1920 and immediately after women's discovery of freedom during World War II working as Rosie-the-Riveter and performing other jobs once the province of men, women were suddenly confronted by returning veterans and society's demand that they give up their careers, return to tending the hearth and re-assume their secondary position to male superiority. Which is to say, like Kate, they needed tamed, as Petruchio does Kate, whom he spanked. That the issue remained unresolved and, in fact, had grown more complicated is revealed in "1998: Adultery and Same-Sex Love's" treatment of a young Shakespeare's affair with another woman while still married to Anne Hathaway and, since in Elizabethan England only men were permitted on the professional stage, the gender-bending overtones of the female lead's assuming the persona of a male in order to get the female role of Juliet in ***Romeo and Juliet***. Since the now disgraced Harvey Weinstein was instrumental in the film's production and one of his alleged victims, Gwyneth Paltrow played the woman-man-woman role, echoes of #MeToo resound.

As we have discussed in previous ***Book Notes*** and as I have explored in my WQLN/NPR radio program/podcast, ***The American Tapestry Project***, race is the defining issue in American history. If not, then why the current hysteria in some quarters about teaching African American history? What is it some people are afraid to learn? Regardless, it might come as surprise to some readers that the question of race in American history has not always been a Black and white issue, because for much of American history the definition of "whiteness" has been a shifting, fluid thing. In particular, in 1840s America with the arrival of the first major wave of non-Anglo immigrants– Irish and German Catholics – who were vilified for their religion and their threat to Anglo-Saxon culture. Then, in the late 19th and early 20th century when approximately 24 million immigrants from southern and Eastern Europe irrevocably changed American culture, but not before first incurring the wrath of Boston Brahmins like Henry Cabot Lodge and Prescott Hall and other members of the Immigration Restriction League who characterized them as 'the mongrel scum of southern and Eastern Europe'.

All of this gave rise to vicious anti-immigrant movements; first, the mid-19th century Know-Nothings and then the late-19th/early 20th century adherents of the pseudo-science of Eugenics. Eugenicists such as Charles Davenport and his apologists Madison Grant and Lathrop Stoddard confused race with ethnicity and narrowed the definition of “white” to those descended from northern Europeans as a justification to exclude everyone else. It might come as a surprise to some descendants of Italian, Jewish, Polish and other ethnicities to discover that to Lodge and his ilk they were not “white.” This led, among many other things, to 1916’s revival of interest in Shakespeare’s ***The Tempest***, which anti-immigrationists conscripted to their cause. They saw in Prospero’s attempts to protect his daughter Miranda – the threat of inter-racial marriage again looming large – by taming, by civilizing the “natural-man” Caliban a metaphor for their own struggle to “anglicize” all these non-white Europeans suddenly in their midst. And, of course, although history does not repeat itself, it does on occasion rhyme, for 21st century politicians like the Stephens Bannon and Miller, just like the Know-Nothings of the 1840s and Henry Cabot Lodge in the early-20th century, know there are votes in attacking immigrants.

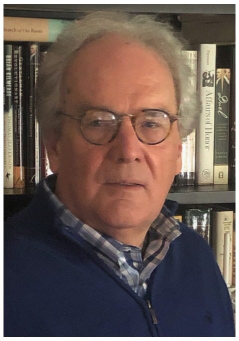
Shapiro bookends his study with an analysis of 2017’s production by the Delacorte Theater in New York’s Central Park of ***Julius Caesar***, in which a thinly veiled Donald Trump figure is cast as Julius Caesar. One might recall that right after the 2016 election, fears of an authoritarian ascendancy were rife and in addition to such contemporary books as Madeline Albright’s ***Fascism: A Primer***, Levitsky and Ziblatt’s ***How Democracies Die*** and Timothy Snyder’s ***On Tyranny*** (for a discussion of which see ***Book Notes #20*** available here), re-issues of anti-authoritarian works such as George Orwell’s ***1984***, Sinclair Lewis’ ***It Can’t Happen Here*** and Aldous Huxley’s ***Brave New World*** were once again bestsellers. Attempting to catch this wave, Public Theater artistic director Oskar Eustis chose to stage ***Julius Caesar***, in which through a clever inversion of nuance, Brutus becomes the hero.

Actually, the nuance does not need to be all that clever, for Shakespeare made it implicit that his heroes were Brutus and Cassius, who defended the people and the republic by slaying the would be tyrant. No fool, however, Shakespeare realized that seeming to sanction regicide in Elizabethan England might not be the best career move. As a result, mid-play he pivots and ***Julius Caesar***, after Antony’s famous speech, becomes a bit of a jumble as marginally incoherent battle scenes leave both Brutus and Cassius dead and Antony triumphant. Which, of course, only teed up the Triumvirate of Antony, Lepidus and Octavian, the latter of whom ultimately prevails, cf. ***Antony and Cleopatra***, when he becomes Caesar Augustus. The moral: slaying a would be tyrant only ends in his nephew becoming the real thing.

Shapiro’s point, however, is that, as throughout American history, when Americans need a backdrop against which to cast their anxieties, fears and, even, hopes, they turn to Shakespeare, who understood power: “When Caesar says, ‘Do this’, it is performed” (1.2, 10). [21] What Eustis was not clever enough to anticipate, unlike Shakespeare, who knew how to have it both ways, was the blowback from right wing media who vilified the production accusing it of advocating assassinating the president. A bit of an overreach, perhaps, but not entirely, for if we believe in the power of art, then we have to also believe in its ability to inspire actions we might not actually condone. Or, in short, we need to attend to what we say, for words have consequences and as Lorenzo says in ***The Merchant of Venice*** “. . .every fool can play upon the word.” (3.5, 43). [22] In our noisy times, the streets are full of fools who think they can advance their cause with social media chatter inspiring some other fool to shoot up a high school, a synagogue, a church prayer meeting, a Walmart or, for that matter, to storm the

U.S. Capitol. So, as Shakespeare understood, we need to measure our speech and dial down the rhetorical temperature.

Regardless, in a marvelously readable book, Shapiro solves the humanities' teacher's greatest challenge by showing us the lasting relevance of Shakespeare. In so showing, he also casts a light upon America's culture wars. He connects our current discontents with their antecedents in American history, showing us that what we think new is but a reflection of our past, which, as Faulkner could tell you, isn't really past at all. Unfortunately, like Ophelia, Shapiro can't tell us where we're going, for prophecy remains elusive, for who yet can answer Banquo's "If you look into the seeds of time/And say which grain will grow and which will not/Speak then to me." (***Macbeth***, 1.3, 58-60). [23] Still, James Shapiro's ***Shakespeare In a Divided America*** will do what Shakespeare himself mastered – it will enlighten and entertain, for Shapiro is, as Griffith said of Wolsey in ***Henry VIII,*** ". . . a scholar, and a ripe and good one/Exceeding wise, fair-spoken and persuading." (***Henry VIII***, 4.2, 51-52). [24]



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End Notes

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1. Shakespeare, William. *"A Midsummer Night's Dream, 3.1.143-144"*. **The Riverside Shakespeare**, Ed. G. Blakemore Evans, et. al. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1974), p.233.
2. __________________. *"Hamlet, 2.2, 43-45"*. **The Riverside Shakespeare**, Ed. G. Blakemore Evans, et. al. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1974), p. 1173.
3. **Cf.** Hotspur is talking to Glendower, his "coz", or cousin, who has been claiming supernatural powers. Hotspur admonishes him to speak truth in "I can teach thee, coz, to shame the devil/By telling truth: tell truth and shame the devil". In *"Henry IV, Part I, 3.1.57-58"*. **The Riverside Shakespeare**, Ed. G. Blakemore Evans, et. al. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1974), p. 864.
4. Shakespeare, William. *"Richard II,* 2.2, 108-109*"*. **The Riverside Shakespeare**, Ed. G. Blakemore Evans, et. al. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1974), p. 817.
5. *"James Shapiro: Biography"*, at **James Shapiro** available at https://www.jamesshapiro.net/bio.htm accessed September 29, 2021.
6. Shapiro, James. ***Shakespeare In a Divided America: What His Plays Tell Us About Our Past and Future.*** (New York: Penguin Books, 2021), p. xi.
7. Shakespeare, William. *"Julius Caesar, 3.2, 104-105"*. **The Riverside Shakespeare**, Ed. G. Blakemore Evans, et. al. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1974), p. 1121.
8. Shapiro, James. ***Shakespeare In a Divided America***, p. xiii.
9. Ibid., p. xii.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
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13. Shakespeare, William. *"Richard, 5.5, 31-32"*. **The Riverside Shakespeare**, Ed. G. Blakemore Evans, et. al. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1974), p. 836.
14. Shapiro, James. ***Shakespeare In a Divided America***, pp. xiv-xv.
15. Ibid., p. xv.
16. Provizer, Steve. *"Book Review: 'Shakespeare in a Divided America' – Illuminating the Bard's Influence on Our History",* in **The Arts Fuse** available at https://artsfuse.org/199394/book-review-shakespeare-in-a-divided-america-illuminating-the-bards-influence-on-our-history accessed September 29, 2021.
17. Shakespeare, William. *"Troilus and Cressida, 2.2, 168-171"*. **The Riverside Shakespeare**, Ed. G. Blakemore Evans, et. al. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1974), p. 463.

18. __________________. *"Romeo and Juliet, 1.1, 190-192 ".* **The Riverside Shakespeare**, Ed. G. Blakemore Evans, et. al. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1974), p. 1061.
19. Shapiro, James. ***Shakespeare In a Divided America***, p. 42.
20. Ibid., pp. 51-52, 56.
21. Shakespeare, William. *"Julius Caesar, 1.2., 10".* **The Riverside Shakespeare**, Ed. G. Blakemore Evans, et. al. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1974), p. 1106.
22. __________________. *"The Merchant of Venice, 3.5, 43".* **The Riverside Shakespeare**, Ed. G. Blakemore Evans, et. al. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1974), p. 274.
23. __________________. *"Macbeth, 1.3, 58-60".* **The Riverside Shakespeare**, Ed. G. Blakemore Evans, et. al. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1974), p. 1314.
24. __________________. *"Henry VIII, 4.2, 51-52".* **The Riverside Shakespeare**, Ed. G. Blakemore Evans, et. al. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1974), p. 1008.

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