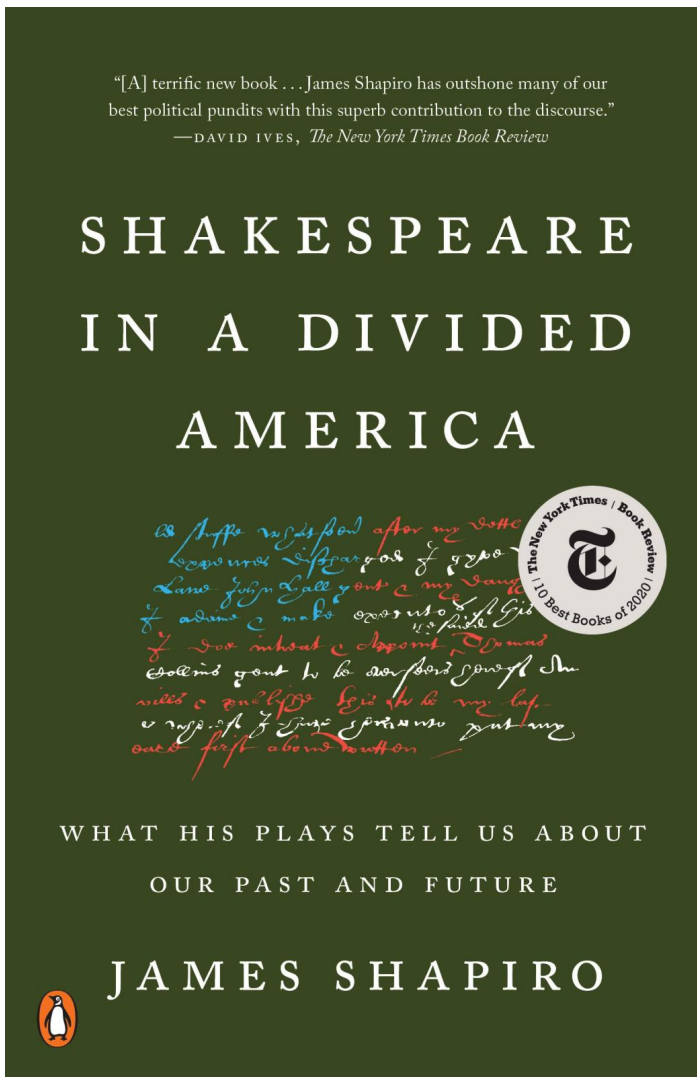


A Book Divided Against Itself

by James Como



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Writing on Shakespeare James Shapiro is authoritative, even compelling; his *1599: A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare* is all the proof anyone needs. The interested layman will find it not only terrifically understandable but often thrilling. Alas, the same cannot be said of his most recent book, a schizophrenic effort: ideologue versus scholar.

Generally, the ideologue provides an inventory of endemic American turpitude. Less generally, it is an anti-Trump polemic as well as an apologia for Shapiro's presence on the

Board that mounted *Julius Caesar* in Central Park very soon after the inauguration. The great merit of the second book, the one produced by a scholar at the top of his game, lies in the richness of its socio-theatrical history of Shakespeare in America, always pinned to events, movements or attitudes in our history (e.g. Manifest Destiny, Class Warfare, Adultery and Same-Sex Love – there are seven such chapters plus an Introduction and Conclusion, Left/Right).

I could barely put the book down, such were the life and times of those who edited, produced, acted, and saw Shakespeare performed across the continent and the centuries – without surcease, for he was a *very* great draw. On the other hand I was tempted, frequently, to heave the first book across the room, not for any factual fraudulence (I believe) but because of its unrelenting spin. At first I thought, Disingenuous?

But, finally, No – not a hint of dishonesty, merely the dogmatic *weltanschauung* that could, fifty years ago, have Pauline Kael, the ultra-liberal movie reviewer, say, and mean, “I don’t know how Richard Nixon won. Everyone I know voted for McGovern.”

This first book, serving as an envelope (with occasional irruptions along the way), begins in the Introduction. There Shapiro cites a dialogue change in the production of *Julius Caesar*: “If Caesar had stabbed their mothers on *Fifth Avenue*” being a reference to Trump’s notorious boast. Shapiro calls the assassination “nothing but a horrible tragic event,” which, we are told, is nothing more than “allowing opposing voices to question the motives of the conspirators” – an explicit lament for the abandonment of the Fairness Doctrine forty years earlier, which (of course) led to the rise of Right-wing talk radio. (There is no mention of NPR, which I would suppose Shapiro takes as even-handed.)

“The play,” wrote the director, Oskar Eustis, “warns about what happens when you try to preserve democracy by nondemocratic means.” The fact that *Caesar* is a Trump

lookalike is passed over. "Those on the political Right could only see one side of the story being enacted onstage: the brutal assassination of President Donald Trump." (He then promises to return to "that – and its implications for the future of Shakespeare in America – in the final chapter.") To this I can add only that we know different Leftists, Mr. Shapiro and I. Talk about *catharsis*, because my acquaintances certainly did.

The second book uses Shakespeare and productions of his plays as darts, better to pin our failings to the wall of shame. But here a caveat: if the reader can ignore both the lack of greater context and Mr. Shapiro's pontifications, he will visit literary, social, and theatrical corners that he very probably has never turned. That is, we are provided a sort of festival of Shakespeare-cum-national history, making it very easy mentally to marginalize the hump on the back of this book.

For example, most readers would know that John Quincy Adams was anti-slavery, so much so, in fact, that he defended the human cargo aboard *The Armistad*. But who knew he was a racist? That is, that he so opposed 'amalgamation' that (like his famous parents) he could barely watch *Othello* without writhing at the image of the white woman embracing the black man (who on stage was actually white, of course). This, in spite of the fact that he was a great fan of Shakespeare.

Fanny Kemble, an English immigrant, played the Desdemona that John Quincy saw, and in the company of others they dined together. There she heard JQA say that he considered Desdemona's misfortunes a just judgment upon her for having married a 'nigger'. And though Adams did not use the word in print, he did commit to print his disapproval. By the way, Kemble revealed the usage, along with genuine shock, in her journal, published in 1863. There, however, she also singled out Adams for special praise as one of those "progressive Northerners" for his "'life-long opposition to the Southern

pretensions'."

Not exactly theater history, or Shakespeare (and cherry-picked at that), the second book offers many such discoveries, and I'm happy to know them. The question, though, is this: other than providing such minor delight, what end is served? It seems Shapiro is mounting an argument – or is he? After learning of Adams' virtually inconsequential opinion we learn of Grant, but in quite a different light. He loved theatre and often performed female roles. Who knew? Very well, now I do and am happy for it.

Along the way we learn a version of the back-story to the Mexican War (as a preamble to the Civil War). But I think . . . and Shakespeare? Enter the great Cushmans, Charlotte as Romeo (manly indeed) and her sister Susan as Juliet. Of course there was much huffing and puffing over Charlotte's hypersexualized Romeo, but that was from an English critic. In fact, she was a gifted actor whom Americans loved. That is fascinating theater history.

Yet neither Adams's divided self, nor Grant's predilections, nor the Cushman-Romeo divided libido – each interesting *per se* – reach the heights claimed by Shapiro's title and Introduction.

On the other hand, his chapter on Class Warfare does, and we get to the heart of Shapiro's matter. (A scorecard would have helped to sort the white hats from the black hats.) Here is his catalogue of New York City riots, one of which he will explore in depth: Negro Riots (1712, 1741), Stamp Act Riot (1765), Doctors Riot (1788), The African Grove Riots (1834-35), the Spring Election Riot (1834), the Abolition Riots (1834-35), the Flour Riots (1837). Now the kicker: Shapiro reports that theaters were generally packed and that "between 1816 and 1834 there were twenty-nine theater-related riots in New York City." Theaters were located in densely populated areas, where riots were tolerated more than

elsewhere, "as a matter between actors and the audience." Still, no theater riot could rival those provoked by one of the great English tragedians, William Macready as Macbeth, performed at the Astor Place Opera House (only a few blocks from the current location of Joseph Papp's Public Theater).

The mixing of classes in theaters (Shapiro tells us) was a "potential threat to a nation's financial and cultural elite." Thus the new Opera Palace was to provide – here Shapiro quotes – "a feeling of repose, of security from rude . . . interruption, a languor of voluptuous enjoyment." Alas, it did not work. Its dress code "rankled," especially the white glove requirement intended to "keep out working-class riffraff." Class mixed with the irritants of politics, race, pricing and immigration. And national identity. Crowds were often stirred by a brew of profanity, Scripture and Shakespeare – often focused on the British. On one night, 10,000 people saw one or another of three productions of *Macbeth*, all three leads played by Brits, but especially Macready, who said, "I cannot act Macbeth without being Macbeth."

Shapiro describes the disruption, then riot, inside the house during Macready's performance. When the actors could not be heard Macready told the cast to play the remainder in silence, which apparently further enraged the rowdies. Finally Macready left the stage and booked passage back to England.

Shapiro opines that "amalgamation, abolition, and a performance of Macbeth by a British actor were all part of the same elitist worldview that had to be forcefully rejected." (Quite an elitist platform.) Meanwhile, pushing "all the right patriotic, nativist, and anti-elitist buttons," was a poster hundreds of which were displayed around town: "WORKING MEN, SHALL AMERICANS OR EBGLISH RULE IN THIS CITY." On the "ENGLISH ARISTOCRATIC OPERA HOUSE, we advocate no violence . . . WORKINGMEN! FREEMEN! STAND BY YOUR RIGHTS!" Later, cannons were brought in as 25000 people gathered.

The strongest chapter – not a pleasant one – is the next, Assassination, valuable for its reminder that Lincoln was not only a great fan of the theater (!) but a serious Shakespeare aficionado, his knowledge of the plays being detailed and encyclopedic. Alas, the weakest chapter is the last (except for the Conclusion): Adultery and Same Sex Love. It is hardly theatrical, barely about Shakespeare. Rather it deals with the multi-awarded movie *Shakespeare in Love*. Except for information about re-writes (Tom Stoppard is a very fine collaborator), we are offered gossip, along with much speculation about the *Zeitgeist* and its influence, especially on script changes.

As for the location that divides the West and East Village these days, where the Opera House stood, Shapiro tells us “the wealthy (i.e. the *non*-rioters and *non*-nativists of his narrative) still claim this real estate as their own.” Enough reason, apparently, for a new riot: “In April 2012 there was a fresh riot when those attending an anarchist book fair nearby, chanting ‘cops are murderers,’ scuffled with police and tried to smash . . . windows.” It would get worse, of course. After all, “Jared Kushner owned a multimillion-dollar apartment on the site . . . and Ivanka Trump moved in there briefly when they married.”

The Conclusion is febrile, like any good propaganda not entirely false, yet so overwrought as to be an embarrassment. But I can imagine Shapiro answering, to paraphrase Pauline Kael, “propaganda? Everyone I know takes it as straight reportage.” By the way, during the notorious Public production of *Julius Caesar*, many unruly loudmouths in the audience shouted objections to Brutus’s defense of the assassination. As it happens, these Deplorables were paid by the director to be “spontaneous.” Shapiro thinks this good theater.