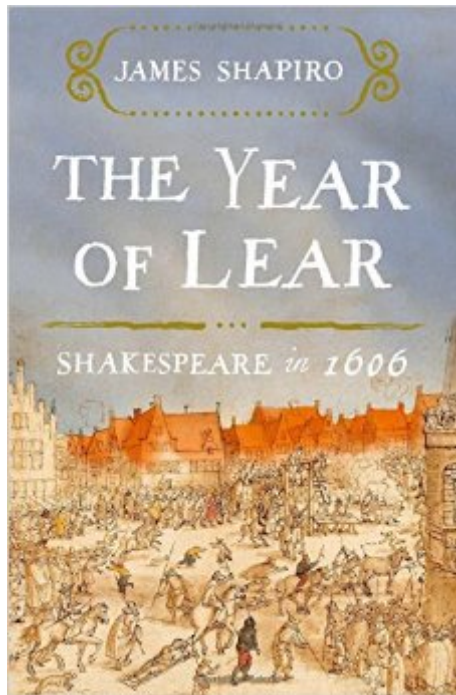


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The Year Of Lear: Shakespeare In 1606



Synopsis

Preeminent Shakespeare scholar James Shapiro shows how the tumultuous events in England in 1606 affected Shakespeare and shaped the three great tragedies he wrote that year—King Lear, Macbeth, and Antony and Cleopatra. In the years leading up to 1606, since the death of Queen Elizabeth and the arrival in England of her successor, King James of Scotland, Shakespeare's great productivity had ebbed, and it may have seemed to some that his prolific genius was a thing of the past. But that year, at age forty-two, he found his footing again, finishing a play he had begun the previous autumn—King Lear—then writing two other great tragedies, Macbeth and Antony and Cleopatra. It was a memorable year in England as well—and a grim one, in the aftermath of a terrorist plot conceived by a small group of Catholic gentry that had been uncovered at the last hour. The foiled Gunpowder Plot would have blown up the king and royal family along with the nation's political and religious leadership. The aborted plot renewed anti-Catholic sentiment and laid bare divisions in the kingdom. It was against this background that Shakespeare finished Lear, a play about a divided kingdom, then wrote a tragedy that turned on the murder of a Scottish king, Macbeth. He ended this astonishing year with a third masterpiece no less steeped in current events and concerns: Antony and Cleopatra. The Year of Lear sheds light on these three great tragedies by placing them in the context of their times, while also allowing us greater insight into how Shakespeare was personally touched by such events as a terrible outbreak of plague and growing religious divisions. For anyone interested in Shakespeare, this is an indispensable book.

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Customer Reviews

"The year 1606 would turn out to be a good one for Shakespeare and an awful one for England. That was no coincidence." 1606 was a particularly tumultuous year. Queen Elizabeth had died childless and unmarried in 1603, succeeded on the throne by the young King of Scotland James I, son of her executed rival Mary, Queen of Scots. The shift in tone, approach and power after the long reign of Elizabeth was dramatic, and the subsequent failed attempt by a small group of Catholic conspirators in November of 1605 to destroy the Parliament and the King in one explosive discharge of gunpowder, shook the foundations of the nation to its core. These twin seismic shocks - a new King and a new political reckoning, coupled with the inevitable fallout and bloody aftermath of the Gunpowder Plot, directly impacted on the direction, focus and content of English theatre, helping drive one of William Shakespeare's most prolific and brilliant years into history. *The Year of Lear* looks in detail at 1606, a year that saw Shakespeare pen *Lear*, *Macbeth* and *Antony & Cleopatra*, three of his most timely, searing and political dramas. James Shapiro follows a similar pattern and approach to his previous work *A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare: 1599*, weaving together political, social, economic, literary and philosophical threads into a deft and focused whole. Shapiro alternates from delving into the events that dominated 1606, into how they impact and influence English theatre and literature in general, and more specifically how these were absorbed by William Shakespeare, player, shareholder and playwright of *The King's Men*.

I purchased this volume after reading Shapiro's *A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare: 1599*, for I really enjoy his efforts to place Shakespeare and his inspiration firmly within the issues of the day. The year 1606 was permeated with the Gunpowder Plot and its aftermath, as the government shifted from horror to relief to extreme paranoia, all while James I was doing his best to unite England and Scotland under one flag (a very unpopular effort). It was a busy year, and the more turmoil wracking the country, the more grist for the playwright's mill. 1606 saw three new plays: *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, and *Antony and Cleopatra*, all fraught with symbolism. For instance: *Macbeth*, which was written shortly after the Gunpowder Plot was exposed, shockingly showed the murder of a Scottish king and its terrible repercussions. But on a more topical level, Shakespeare took advantage of the contemporary trial and execution of Henry Garnet, who composed the *Treatise of Equivocation* - a how-to guide for Jesuits put to the question. In essence, Garnet demonstrated that a prisoner could say one thing to the authorities, while reserving in his mind the real truth, and hence save his soul because God knew the difference. The government was horrified at the repercussions, and Garnet was eventually captured, tried, and executed. But Shakespeare

was fascinated, and most of his characters equivocate their way through the play. The Witches equivocated in every utterance, such as telling Macbeth he will be king, but neglecting to tell him he won't keep the crown. Lady Macbeth equivocated when she covered for her husband's behavior at the banquet after he saw Banquo's ghost. Macbeth neglected to tell his wife what the Witches said Banquo would be the father of kings.

The issues of the early years of King James reign were succession of the crown, the union of Scotland and England, plague and the Gunpowder Plot which threatened to kill the King and all of Parliament. Shapiro shows that Shakespeare took these themes and molded them into his great works of that year. King James of Scotland succeeded Queen Elizabeth (last of the Tudor family) and was desirous of uniting the two countries under the name of Great Britain. While there was relief that the succession took place without a war, neither Parliament nor Scotland were really keen on uniting under one flag. Shapiro points out that "Shakespeare had never found an occasion to use the word 'British' before James's accession; the first time that audiences hear it in one of his plays was in King Lear, where it occurs three times. Similarly, the word 'Britain' which had appeared only twice in Shakespeare's Elizabethan drama, occurs that many times in King Lear alone, and twenty-nine times in all in his Jacobean plays." (Loc 654) King Lear of course takes on these topics where the King divides his kingdom among two daughters and disowns a daughter who leads a fight to reunite the kingdom - with disastrous consequences. Shakespeare did not develop his stories from whole cloth; he drew from an earlier play, King Leir, as well as Holinshed, Edmund Spenser and Geoffrey of Monmouth (Loc 748) Macbeth takes on the themes of assassination of a king and equivocation. These themes were on the minds of the entire kingdom following discovery of the Gunpowder Plot in November 5, 1605 where a group tried to blow up the Parliament building when the King would be addressing parliament. The Privy Council happened upon the plot just days before it was to have taken place.

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