Books

Shadowing Shakespeare

A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare: 1599, by James Shapiro ’77CC (HarperCollins, 394 pages, $27.95).

Shakespeare, by Mark Van Doren ’21GSAS, ’60HON (New York Review Books Classics, 302 pages, $15.95).

By
Todd Hearon
|
Fall 2006

If, as Plato dreamed, man is the shadow of a shadow, then what must a playwright be? The shadow of a shadow, making shadows? And if the playwright is William Shakespeare? Then, one guesses, the greatest shadow maker of all time. He has certainly cast his own shadow over every successive generation, over none more obscurely than the biographers. We just don’t know enough. He left behind no diaries, no grocery lists, no letters. The corridors of his days are dimly lit; one looks in vain to find the man behind his characters. The dearth of information has led some to deny his authorial existence altogether, attributing the writing of the plays to his more historically verifiable contemporaries: Christopher Marlowe, Francis Bacon, Edward de Vere. For others, the scarcity becomes open ground for speculation, building fiction out of what little facts we have (*Will in the World*, Stephen Greenblatt’s historicist approach, par excellence). Still others have removed the Bard completely from his historic moment, re-creating him, essentially, into timeless versions of themselves (Johnson’s Shakespeare, we still say; Coleridge’s Shakespeare; Harold Bloom’s . . .).

Now James Shapiro, the Larry Miller Professor of English and Comparative Literature, has added to the store. *A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare: 1599* situates the Bard firmly in history, presenting a synoptic view of the playwright suspended in a particular moment of time. It’s as though the trajectory of a life were arrested mid-arc and turned into a cross-section. Looking in, we see the threads converge and

intertwine, view life from its many angles — the artistic, religious, political, and so on. So what can one year — *this* year — tell us about our most luminous shadow? In Shapiro's study, it turns out, quite a lot.

For starters, look at the literary output. In 1599, one of the best-selling books is *The Passionate Pilgrim* by "W. Shakespeare." The author, who is 35, will embark this year upon a period of unprecedented, even unparalleled, literary accomplishment, completing three plays — *Henry V, Julius Caesar, As You Like It* — and beginning to draft his masterwork, *Hamlet*. Remarkable by any standard. But consider, further, his daily immersion in the nuts-and-bolts routine, what Yeats called "theatre business, management of men": In 1599, Shakespeare was a "key member and shareholder of the Chamberlain's Men, a company of traveling players who performed in front of both royalty and regular citizens"; with them, "he juggled creative and administrative responsibilities, rehearsing, writing, and performing while also supervising the building of the Globe Theatre, a huge gamble for all the principals involved." Add to this the insatiable demand of London theatergoers upon Shakespeare and his rival dramatists for new material, plays to please both court and commoners, works both pleasurably conventional and experimentally sharp. The wonder is not only that Shakespeare produced such fine plays this year; it's that he produced them at all.

Shapiro broadens his focus to include the dominant domestic and international issues occupying the minds of Elizabethans (and, presumably, Shakespeare) at the time, seismic tremors and shifts in all spheres — political, economic, philosophical, cultural, religious, and social. A short list includes England's deploying of troops under Essex to crush an Irish rebellion, and the difficult truce that followed; ongoing hostilities with Spain and the threat of an Armada invasion; the beginnings of the East India Company and the subsequent rise of global capitalism; suppression of seditious writings and speech; mounting anxiety over a successor to Britain's aging and childless queen; religious tensions and the dying code of chivalry. Such political tensions and topical issues — censorship, tyranny, and controversies over the calendar — come into Shakespeare's reimagining of the ancient tragedy of *Julius Caesar*, Shapiro argues. The intrigue and uncertainty in the air at court, as well as the nostalgia for a passing age, influence the Bard's creation of *Hamlet*.

A decade of archival research turns up more material: Shapiro demonstrates how contemporary sermons, political tracts, letters, diaries, travelers' accounts, and official records shed light on the man. He directs us toward not only what

Shakespeare might have read, but what public spectacles he might have witnessed, what art he might have viewed, the people with whom he must have spoken, what he might have heard by way of rumors and facts in the ferment of London and the Elizabethan court. In all, he shows an artist immersed in his historic moment, responsive — as Shakespeare must have been — to what Hamlet called the “form and pressure” of his time. And he amply substantiates his claim that this year, 1599, is pivotal, “the decisive one in Shakespeare’s development as a writer.”

A vastly different but equally illuminating treatment is afforded by another Columbia professor, the legendary Mark Van Doren, in his collection of essays, *Shakespeare*, first published by Henry Holt in 1939 and newly reissued by New York Review Books Classics. The essays grew out of a course Van Doren taught in the 1930s and ’40s whose roster included a number of students, who would become luminaries in their own right: the poets John Berryman, Allen Ginsberg, Richard Howard, John Hollander, Louis Simpson, just to name a few. Where Shapiro’s focus is on a historical moment, and on what that moment might tell us about the man, Van Doren’s is all upon the art: “The biography of Shakespeare is the biography of his art, his intellect, and his imagination.” To know Shakespeare, in Van Doren’s eyes, is to trace his development as an artist through the plays and poems; the playwright swells in stature precisely through his technical discoveries, imaginative facility, and felicities.

Harold Bloom’s recent book credits Shakespeare with the invention of the human; Van Doren’s essay on the gratuitously bloody *Titus Andronicus* suggests that Shakespeare first had to learn to be humane: The inhumanity of the play is symptomatic of the inexperience of the author. One indication of growth is self-parody, a state that Shakespeare brilliantly achieves by the end of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Along the way, there is the growing self-consciousness of his powers as a poet: “The author of *Richard II* is perhaps more interested in poetry than he will ever be again. He is still learning to write at a fabulous rate; he is still making the most remarkable discoveries of powers with his pen which he could not have guessed were there before, let alone measured.” The book is rich with such instances where we learn Shakespeare even as *he* learns the limits and potentials of his style.

Van Doren is at his best when elucidating character or, more particularly, characteristic speech. “Language most shews a man,” wrote Shakespeare’s great contemporary, Ben Jonson. “Speak, that I may see thee.” Van Doren follows this line of idea throughout, showing how speech patterns encapsulate and reveal character.

Witness Shylock in The *Merchant of Venice*, whose voice “comes rasping into the play like a file,” so different from the musical voices that surround him. “[T]he edge of it not only cuts but tears, not only slices but saws. He is always repeating phrases, half to himself, as misers do — hoarding them if they are good, unwilling to give them wings so they may spend themselves generously in the free air of mutual talk.” Or Falstaff, whose “native speech is casual yet pure, natural yet distinguished, easy and yet expertly wrenched out of line with the conventions of syntax.” Like language, like man. Or, more broadly, the characters in *Julius Caesar*, who all “tend to talk alike; their training has been forensic and therefore uniform, so that they can say anything with both efficiency and ease.” Even the monster Caliban gets his due: “His characteristic speech does not open the mouth to music; it closes it rather on harsh, hissing, or guttural consonants that in the slowness with which they must be uttered express the difficult progress of a mind bemired in fact, an imagination beslimed with particulars.”

Thankfully, Van Doren’s mind and imagination work in just the opposite way with their facts and particulars; his eye is so keen, his facility with phrasing so adept and surprising — to say nothing of his encyclopedic knowledge of the plays (they are all treated here, along with the poems) — one leaves the experience of reading each essay exhilarated and refreshed. Their brevity is part of the exhilaration: As David Lehman writes in his foreword, each piece was written in a sustained burst of energy. “The professor kept his Columbia students in mind as he wrote. ‘Things they had said to me, things I had said to them, and things they now might learn for the first time as I myself was learning them’ all went into the writing.” One has the feeling, moving through the book, of listening to an extraordinarily high and finely tuned current of thinking. It’s what those students of years ago must have felt sitting under the master’s tutelage.

Todd Hearon’s work appears in various literary journals, including AGNI*,* Harvard Review*,* The New Republic*,* Parnassus*,* Poetry*,* Slate *and* The Southern Review*. He lives in Exeter, N.H.*

Read more from
Todd Hearon

Guide to school abbreviations

All categories >
Read more from
Todd Hearon