The Enduring Power of Shakespeare’s Plays

Shakespeare’s plays continue to be used, mis-used, and weaponized.

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When he visited the War Department’s Telegraph Office to get news from the front and send instructions to his generals, Abraham Lincoln read lengthy passages of Shakespeare’s plays from texts he brought with him. During the last two years of his life, the president watched dozens of Shakespeare’s plays in Washington, D.C. theaters and grilled leading actors who visited the White House about their interpretations of characters and changes and omissions to what the Bard had written. When Lincoln was assassinated, mourners turned again and again to *Macbeth*, likening him to the slain Duncan, who “Hath borne his faculties so meek, hath been/ So clear in his great office that his virtues/ Will please like angels, trumpet-tongued, against/ The deep damnation of his taking-off.”
Throughout American history, James Shapiro, a professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University and the Shakespeare Scholar in Residence at the Public Theater in New York City, demonstrates that Shakespeare’s plays have remained common cultural property and have been (and are being) used, misused, and weaponized in controversies involving inter-racial sex, class conflict, assassination, immigration, marriage, adultery, and same-sex love. Elegant, engaging, and enlightening, *Shakespeare in a Divided America* is a not-at-all guilty pleasure in this winter of our discontent.

Praised and pilloried as an implacable opponent of slavery, former president John Quincy Adams, Shapiro reveals, vilified Desdemona for her “unnatural” passion for a black man. When Othello “smothers her in bed,” Adams added, the appropriate sentiment is that she gets “her desserts.” Adams’ commitment to abolitionism, Shapiro speculates, required a counterweight, which he found in a repudiation of amalgamation that avoided criticism of black men by directing his enmity at Desdemona.

Ignited by the feud between the two great Shakespearean actors of the mid-nineteenth century, Edwin Forrest, an American, and William Macready, an Englishman, the Astor Place Opera House riots, Shapiro writes, exposed the identity of the United States as a classless society as a fiction. Completed in 1847, the theater banned unaccompanied women, and enforced a dress code – black coat, vest, cravat, and white gloves for men – in effect separating laborers from wealthier subscribers. More than a few observers thought the changes threatened “the spontaneous cohesion of interest and sympathy that binds a republic.”

At the turn of the twentieth century, we learn, *The Tempest* was enlisted by advocates of restrictions on immigration to the United States, singling out Caliban, who tries to rape Miranda and conspires in the overthrow of Prospero, as their example of a racial type “whose nature/Nurture never sticks.”

To illuminate changing attitudes toward patriarchy and domesticity following the end of World War II, a time in which women were pressured or forced to leave the workplace and return to hearth and home, Shapiro examines *Taming of the Shrew* and changes in the scripts of *Kiss Me Kate*, the Broadway play (1947) and the movie (1953). As it moves from stanza to stanza, he indicates, Cole Porter’s “Brush Up Your Shakespeare” watches women kowtow to men: “If she
fights when her clothes you are mussing,/ What are clothes? Much Ado About Nussing” is followed by “If she says your behavior is heinous/ Kick her right in the Coriolanus.”

Shapiro also examines the making of the film *Shakespeare in Love* (which had its premiere eight days after the House of Representative launched impeachment proceedings against President Clinton), highlighting the role of now disgraced producer Harvey Weinstein, who wanted Will, who is unhappily married to Ann Hathaway, to keep Viola around as a mistress, in exchange for promoting her career.

*Shakespeare in a Divided America* begins and ends with a production of *Julius Caesar* at the open-air Delacorte Theater in Central Park in Manhattan. Oskar Eustis, the artistic director of the Public Theater, who had once believed that Cassius was right and Brutus was wrong, Shapiro reveals, now wanted audiences (as he believed Shakespeare had intended) to see as many arguments justifying the emperor’s assassination as condemning it; ask when the end justifies the means and how values can be reconciled with desires. He should have known, Shapiro implies, that casting Caesar as a tall blond, dressed in a business suit with overlong blue and red ties, with a fashionably-dressed, Slavic-accented wife, would infuriate supporters of President Trump. And that *Fox & Friends* would weigh in, with a vengeance.

Citing the ensuing controversy as well as evidence that more than 90% of high schools teach Shakespeare’s plays, with no other writer read nearly as much, Shapiro concludes that the Bard continues to have a future in the United States, but warns that that future is precarious: while there has always been a tug of war over Shakespeare, the “rope is now frayed.” Will it continue to unravel or rip us apart? As President Trump likes to say, “We’ll see.”

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