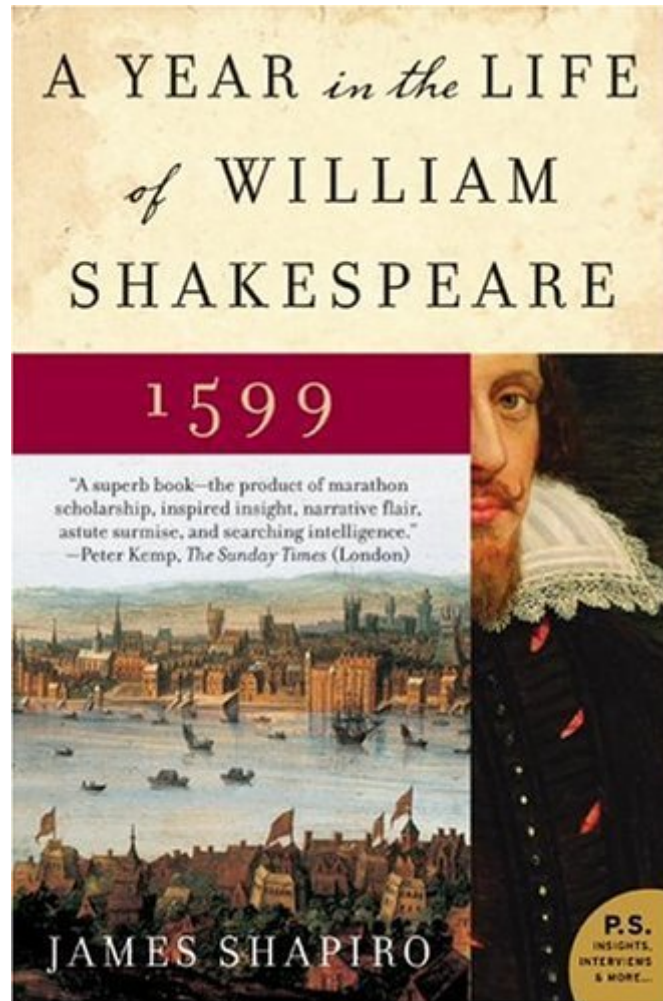


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# A Year In The Life Of William Shakespeare: 1599



## Synopsis

1599 was an epochal year for Shakespeare and England. Shakespeare wrote four of his most famous plays: Henry the Fifth, Julius Caesar, As You Like It, and, most remarkably, Hamlet; Elizabethans sent off an army to crush an Irish rebellion, weathered an Armada threat from Spain, gambled on a fledgling East India Company, and waited to see who would succeed their aging and childless queen. James Shapiro illuminates both Shakespeare's staggering achievement and what Elizabethans experienced in the course of 1599, bringing together the news and the intrigue of the times with a wonderful evocation of how Shakespeare worked as an actor, businessman, and playwright. The result is an exceptionally immediate and gripping account of an inspiring moment in history.

## Book Information

File Size: 1026 KB

Print Length: 432 pages

Publisher: HarperCollins e-books; Reprint edition (October 13, 2009)

Publication Date: October 13, 2009

Sold by: Amazon Digital Services LLC

Language: English

ASIN: B000FCKH60

Text-to-Speech: Enabled

X-Ray: Not Enabled

Word Wise: Enabled

Lending: Not Enabled

Enhanced Typesetting: Enabled

Best Sellers Rank: #118,467 Paid in Kindle Store (See Top 100 Paid in Kindle Store) #38

in Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Arts & Literature > Theatre #46 in Kindle Store > Kindle eBooks > Literature & Fiction > British > Shakespeare #90 in Books > Literature & Fiction > British & Irish > Shakespeare > Literary Criticism

## Customer Reviews

This wonderful book will be a classic. It combines specific new historical information discovered by Shapiro's original research--yes, new information can still be found on Shakespeare!--with an insightful reading of the great plays he wrote just before, during, and immediately after his annus mirabilis 1599. For those who enjoy juicy, well-researched historical detail on the Bard's life and

times (such as Frank Kermode's *The Age of Shakespeare*), Shapiro goes to the next level in this book. He depicts Shakespeare's life as he lived it during one momentous year, 1599, a decision that is not arbitrary. Shapiro's close focus on that year succeeds in illuminating much about Shakespeare's imagination that was previously obscure. And what a year it was--producing the break-through plays *Henry V*, *Julius Caesar*, *As You Like It*, and *Hamlet*. Shapiro describes how the year began as Shakespeare and his co-investors surreptitiously and hurriedly worked to save their financial investment by dismantling a theatre building on a site where they had lost their lease, in order to rebuild it as *The Globe* on the south side of the Thames. Shapiro then explains better than I have read anywhere else the nature of Shakespeare's relationship with the Court of Queen Elizabeth, and how his performances before the Queen and his understanding of the royal taste affected his decisions when he wrote his plays. Shapiro provides fresh insight into how Shakespeare's financial prospects and artistic choices that year were interwoven with the rising, and then the plummeting, fate of Robert Devereaux, the tragic Earl of Essex.

Two rather obvious conclusions leap off the pages of just about every book ever written about William Shakespeare: That his plays reflect the turbulent times in which he lived, and that very little is known for certain about his life. James Shapiro, a much respected Shakespeare scholar and professor at Columbia University, has applied his enormous fund of Shakespearean knowledge and his zeal for historical research to these home truths in a novel way. He narrows his focus down to a single year in Shakespeare's life and teases out of the four plays that occupied the Bard in that year a number of stimulating conclusions. As a feat of sheer scholarly research, Shapiro's book is a mind-boggling performance -- his bibliography runs to 41 pages --- and his conclusions, while obviously personal and open to debate, will make readers go back to those four plays equipped with new tools for decoding them. In 1599 Shakespeare finished "*Henry the Fifth*," wrote "*Julius Caesar*" and "*As You Like It*," and shaped his first version of "*Hamlet*" --- four truly great plays. He was also involved in the construction of the *Globe Theater* (of which he was part owner) and busy acting on its stage. Offstage noises in his life (though very much onstage for most Englishmen) were the ill-fated English expedition to subdue a rebellion in Ireland, the threat of invasion from a second Spanish Armada, a host of intrigues and plots at the court of Queen Elizabeth, England's attempt to shoulder its way into the lucrative East Indies trade, and even his own domestic affairs back home in Stratford. Dealing with all this gives Shapiro's book a divided focus.

In this insightful and innovative book, Shapiro adopts the reverse approach to the usual. Instead of

analysing the plays to find the man, he explores the life to illuminate the plays. The result is a revelation of both. A Prologue describes the building of the Globe from timbers secretly transported across the Thames by Shakespeare and Co. from The Theatre (on which the lease had expired). Then Shapiro trains his lens on 1599, dividing it into its four "seasons". Maintaining dynamic readability throughout, each season deals with a set of preoccupations at national, professional, and personal levels: 1. Winter - Shakespeare's artistic differences with his comic star, Will Kemp; the run-up to Essex's Ireland campaign, with mobilisation and departure - as well as pacifism. 2. Spring - logistics of building the Globe; censorship, book-burning and history; the appropriation of religious holidays for political purposes. 3. Summer - paranoia in London with rumours of a second Armada invasion); Shakespeare's anguish at an unauthorised, cobbled-together edition of his poems; sincerity, fakery, and learning the true nature of love. 4. Autumn - the decline of chivalric values and rise of empire via merchant-adventurers and the East India Company; the impact of Montaigne's essays on soliloquies; and finally, an elucidation of how the various versions of "Hamlet" reveal Shakespeare's changing view of this most problematic play. Shapiro correlates these topics with the themes and language of Henry V, Julius Caesar, As You Like It, and Hamlet (the four dramas Shakespeare wrote in 1599). He also provides us with details so unexpected as to be poignant - for example, Shakespeare changing horses while riding home to Stratford.

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