



A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare: 1599

By James Shapiro

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An intimate history of Shakespeare, following him through a single year -- 1599 -- that changed not only his fortunes but the course of literature

How was Shakespeare transformed from being a talented poet and playwright to become one of the greatest writers who ever lived? In this one exhilarating year we follow what he reads and writes, what he sees, and whom he works with as he invests in the new Globe Theatre and creates four of his most famous plays -- *Henry the Fifth*, *Julius Caesar*, *As You Like It*, and, most remarkably, *Hamlet*.

James Shapiro illuminates both Shakespeare's staggering achievement and what Elizabethans experienced in the course of 1599: sending off an army to crush an Irish rebellion, weathering an Armada threat from Spain, gambling on the fledgling East India Company, and waiting to see who would succeed their aging and childless queen.

This book brings the news and intrigue of the times together 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.

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A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare: 1599 By James Shapiro Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #742769 in Books
- Published on: 2005-10-18
- Released on: 2005-10-18
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 9.00" h x 1.39" w x 6.00" l, 1.10 pounds
- Binding: Hardcover
- 416 pages

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

The year 1599 was crucial in the Bard's artistic evolution as well as in the historical upheavals he lived through. That year's output—*Henry V*, *Julius Caesar*, *As You Like It* and (debatably) *Hamlet*—not only spans a shift in artistic direction and theatrical taste, but also echoes the intrigues of Queen Elizabeth's court and the downfall of her favorite, the Earl of Essex. Like other Shakespeare biographers, Columbia professor Shapiro notes the importance of mundane events in Shakespeare's art, starting here with the construction of the Globe Theatre and the departure of Will Kemp, the company's popular comic actor. Having a stable venue and repertory gave Shakespeare the space to write and experiment during the turmoil created by Essex's unsuccessful military ventures in Ireland, a threatened invasion by a second Spanish Armada and, finally, Essex's disastrous return to court. Shapiro is in a minority in arguing for Shakespeare initially composing *Hamlet* at the same time Essex was plotting a coup; there's little textual or documentary evidence for that dating. Still, Shapiro's shrewd discussion of what is arguably Shakespeare's greatest play, particularly its multiple versions, rounds out this accessible yet erudite work.

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From [The New Yorker](#)

Instead of relying on the meagre evidence about Shakespeare's personal life, Shapiro's biography examines how public events left their mark on the four plays—"Henry V," "Julius Caesar," "As You Like It," and "Hamlet"—that Shakespeare wrote during 1599, the year in which the thirty-five-year-old playwright "went from being an exceptionally talented writer to one of the greatest who ever lived." The approach proves illuminating for the overtly political plays. Lines in "Henry V" allude to a rebellion in Ireland that Elizabeth I had recently sent the Earl of Essex to suppress. Chapters on "As You Like It" and "Hamlet" revert to more conventional textual analysis, interlarded with biographical speculations and digressions; for instance, Rosalind's journey to Arden may derive from Shakespeare's annual trip to Stratford to see his wife and daughters, and the "limbs with travel tired" of the twenty-seventh sonnet perhaps reflect the poor condition of English highways.

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From [Booklist](#)

Starred Review The year 1599 was an extraordinary one for England. The great poet Edmund Spenser came in a huff from Ireland, urging that the natives there be put down (starvation was the means he urged). The Earl of Essex led an army across the Irish Sea to pacify the rebels; he spent thousands, knighted hundreds, and achieved a flimsy truce. The queen's censors waxed vigilant; the second printing of a best-selling history, mildly critical of royalty, became kindling for a bonfire of satires suggesting that Elizabeth, 66, was declining and speculating on who, or what, would succeed her. Arguably most important, the East India Company was formed, betokening the emergence of capitalism just as Essex's Irish fiasco put paid to the age of chivalry. Meanwhile, the Chamberlain's Men erected a new theater, the Globe, with the hastily disassembled materials of their old one. They presented *Henry V*, *Julius Caesar*, and *As You Like It* by their resident dramatist, who also wrote the first version of *Hamlet*. Those four plays marked changes in Shakespeare's style, intent, and vision that Shapiro eloquently, convincingly links to England's contemporary great events. This book is a masterpiece, simply a masterpiece. *Ray Olson*

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Users Review

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