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## James Shapiro

**A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare**  
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**Q:In some ways this book seems to have been written in response to the kind of reader who prefers to read a text outside of its historical context, and to whom universality of meaning is the measure of greatness. Your book is an eloquent and even passionate explanation of the limited nature of such an approach. What is behind the desire to make writing from the past apply to the present cultural and personal moment?**

A: One of Shakespeare's greatest gifts was his grasp of his cultural moment—and we miss an awful lot that's going on in his plays unless we understand that moment. I think there's a real hunger out there for understanding the historical conditions in which great art is created, and I've devoted my career to uncovering and describing the ones that shaped Shakespeare's writing and which, to my mind, magnify just how remarkable a writer he was.

**Q:When you make a lifelong study of a writer like Shakespeare, you must inevitably develop a sense of personal connection. You write in the preface about the danger of falling into the guessing game of imagining what Shakespeare "must have" thought or felt. How did you work with this tendency?**

A: I fight this tendency, tooth and nail, and try to remind myself that Shakespeare was a lot different than we are today. On the other hand, though I haven't developed a deeper sense of his enigmatic personality, I have a much stronger personal connection to his language and style, an endless source of pleasure.

**Q:Can you tell us which of Shakespeare's plays is your favorite, and why? Is there a filmed version of any of the plays that you like?**

A: It's hard to choose between Hamlet and King Lear—both brilliant plays, endlessly rich, disturbing, and rewarding. I've found that the history plays come across best on film; I recently watched Kenneth Branagh's film of *Henry V* again and it hasn't lost any of its power.

**Q:You write about Shakespeare's contribution to the shift toward interiority and conflict in his characters. This is a very modern concept of consciousness. Who are some of the other writers who contributed to this evolving understanding of the human mind?**

A: The Renaissance was particularly rich in this respect: Montaigne, more than any other writer; Cervantes, too. And for an English writer other than Shakespeare, I'd point to the poet and preacher John Donne.

**Q:Could you say something about the ways in which factual research and imagination interact in any interpretation of history, in both positive and problematic ways?**

A: You can't have one without the other; the challenge is finding the right balance between the desire to present the reader with all the facts you uncover and the need to tell a good story. If I erred in writing this book, it was on the side of storytelling: I must have trimmed my book by a third in the last round or revisions. It hurt to take out material that I had worked so hard to find; but the prospect of boring—and losing—readers hurt even more.