SHAKESPEARE IN A DIVIDED AMERICA: WHAT HIS PLAYS TELL US ABOUT OUR PAST AND FUTURE. By James Shapiro. New York, NY: Penguin Press, 2020. 286 pp. $27.00 hardback.

SHAKESPEARE AND TRUMP. By Jeffrey R. Wilson. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2020. 228 pp. $25.00 paperback.

In the turbulent month of March 2020, the first deaths from COVID-19 were reported in the United States, President Trump finally declared a state of emergency and unleashed $50 billion in federal resources to battle the pandemic, and more than 1,100 American institutions of higher education in all fifty states cancelled in-person classes and shifted to online instruction. Beware the Ides, indeed.

Coincidentally, March 2020 was also the month that James Shapiro and Jeffrey R. Wilson published *Shakespeare in a Divided America* and *Shakespeare and Trump*, respectively. As a pair, Shapiro and Wilson's latest works exemplify an emergent, public-facing, and politically conscious style of Shakespearean scholarship in the U.S.

Shapiro who currently serves as the Larry Miller Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University has authored several critically acclaimed and widely popular books on Shakespeare, including *1599: A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare* (2005) and *1606: William Shakespeare and the Year of Lear* (2015)—both of which focus on a single, consequential year in Shakespeare's life. Shapiro also edited the lesser-known anthology, *Shakespeare in America* (2013), which charts Shakespeare's presence in American culture from 1773-2004. With his latest offering, *Shakespeare in a Divided America*, Shapiro draws on this rich archival research and drills deeply into eight defining moments in American history from 1833-2017, each aligned with a Shakespearean theme.

In "1845: Manifest Destiny," Shapiro finds that the "manly superiority" (29) inherent in antebellum America's westward expansion impacted the era's acting traditions. But rather than rehashing familiar accounts of Forrest and Macready, Shapiro illuminates more personal, parenthetical moments which trouble this hypermasculine narrative. One such tangent depicts Ulysses S. Grant's short-lived stint as a Shakespearean actor in a production of *Othello* at an Army base in Corpus Christi, Texas, in 1845. Chosen for his

small stature, Grant was cast in the role of Desdemona, but he never performed the role for an audience. Nevertheless, as Shapiro poignantly observes, "a future general and president saw the world, for a brief moment, through the eyes of a white woman in love with a black man" (31).

"1849: Class Warfare" deserves star billing in any theatre history seminar. Shapiro's treatment of the Astor Place riots is intimately detailed and, sadly, immediately resonant. Rather than seeing the riots as the final event in the history of shared public spaces between all classes in American culture (as Lawrence Levine does in his 1988 account of the riots in *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*), Shapiro views them as the expression of "an intense desire by the middle and lower classes to continue sharing that space, and to oppose, violently if necessary, efforts to exclude them from it" (78).

In "1948: Marriage," Shapiro presents a history of the Broadway musical *Kiss Me, Kate*, which he sees as a response to two "conflicting directives" (153) the federal government impressed upon American women during the 1940s: one pushing women toward the workplace during the war, and another urging women to embrace their roles as homemakers after the war. Shapiro repositions *Kiss Me, Kate*—the raucous 1948 stage musical, not the neutered 1953 film version—amidst these competing messages (and skyrocketing postwar divorce rates) as a "fleeting glimpse of the struggle in postwar America for greater sexual freedom, racial integration, and women's choice" (172).

"1999: Adultery and Same-Sex Love" should be considered a cornerstone reading in Shakespeare Studies and American cultural history. In this chapter, Shapiro sustains a brilliant close reading of the multiple drafts and versions of *Shakespeare in Love*, and argues that the 1999 winner for Best Picture "proved to be a film of and for its time—and on the wrong side of history" (195). Shapiro situates the film amidst not only the Clinton impeachment scandal, but also the swirling American anxieties about the sanctity of marriage and same-sex love.

Shapiro's book ends where Wilson's begins—with an account of Oscar Eustis' infamous 2017 production of *Julius Caesar*. The production was staged at the Delacorte Theater in Central Park and featured a Donald Trump

look-alike in the titular role, causing a firestorm of protest from the political right. Where Shapiro believes that Eustis' *Caesar* "may well come to be seen, like the production that triggered the Astor Place riots, as a sign of the times, and of times to come" (204), Wilson prefers to probe its anachronisms and dramaturgical underpinnings with a detached scrutiny. Wilson asks fundamental questions about the controversial production, questions like: "Caesar was sincere and dignified, while Trump is a circus clown. So how can Donald Trump be Julius Caesar?" (131).

This is the type of clear-sighted, generative, and just plain fun question that typifies *Shakespeare and Trump*. Wilson is a faculty member at Harvard University's Writing Program, where he teaches the "Why Shakespeare?" section of the first-year writing course. *Shakespeare and Trump* is his first book (although *Shakespeare and Game of Thrones* is listed as "forthcoming" on his CV). Where Shapiro takes a broad view of Shakespeare in America from its founding to the present day, Wilson limits his scope to events surrounding the 2016 Presidential election.

According to Wilson, most scholars "use literary and cultural theory to unpack Shakespeare" (12). In *Shakespeare and Trump,* Wilson works in the opposite direction. He proposes that "by thinking society through Shakespeare, we can use Shakespeare to create new theory—working up from literary texts to generalizable ideas that can explain life beyond the texts" (ibid.).

In the equally hilarious and chilling chapter "Bannon's Shakespeare," Wilson conducts a close read of Steve Bannon's high-concept screen adaptations of *Titus Andronicus* and *Coriolanus* written in the 1990s. Rather than mercilessly ridicule them (which the press has already done to an admirable degree), Wilson takes them seriously, asking what they may reveal about Trump's campaign, presidency, and ideology. The answer, alas, is unclear. What Wilson uncovers at the core of these clunky adaptations is a "tragic populism" characterized by its "destructive impulse" (42). Fair enough. But Wilson ends the chapter awkwardly, straining under the weight of his own footnotes (a total of seventy-nine in this first chapter). Wilson reaches for a vision of Bannon as Falstaff and "alt-right gamer kids" as Hal. The argument almost works, but fizzles when Wilson concludes the chapter

by merely quoting—at length—Hal's banishment speech addressed to Falstaff at the conclusion of *Henry IV, Part 2*.

Wilson finds more success in "Protesting Trump by Protesting Shakespeare," which recounts a series of protests in the Penn State English Department during the 2016-2017 academic year. After a town hall meeting held to discuss the results of the Presidential election, graduate students tore down a portrait of William Shakespeare in the Heyer Staircase leading to the department, and replacing it with a makeshift portrait of Audre Lorde, "a black, lesbian, feminist, activist poet from New York" (75). Wilson tackles the case study with admirable energy and ambition, introducing what he terms the "Heyer Dialectic" (92), in which Trump's election has served as a unifier for various factions of the American political left. But while his analysis is incisive and compelling, his conclusions are rather rosy: "The Heyer Dialectic encompasses the whole range of citizens who believe in both principles proclaimed by Shakespeare's canonicity, ideas sometimes presented as paradoxical but in fact entirely compatible: 1) the Western tradition is glorious and deserves to be celebrated, and 2) the most glorious part of Western civilization is its openness to others" (94). Here we see the biggest difference between Wilson and Shapiro: Wilson uses Shakespeare to strive for progressive reform and mutual understanding; Shapiro shows us how Shakespeare has further divided Americans, both in the past and the present.

Taken together, these two books represent an exciting turn in Shakespeare Studies and theatre education. Both writers practice their skills of close readings of Shakespeare's texts to construct sophisticated arguments about American history and culture. Shapiro's masterful history will certainly become a syllabus staple in seminars throughout the coming semesters. Wilson's energized, public-facing study will serve as model for theatre scholars eager to write inclusive and politically conscious new work.

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