

Reviews

Shakespeare's Shrine: The Bard's Birthplace and the Invention of Stratford-upon-Avon. By JULIA THOMAS. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. 2012. Pp. 218. \$19.95 (PB) ISBN 978-0-8122-2337-8; \$19.95 (e-book) ISBN 978-0-8122-0662-3.

When one hears the name *Stratford*, one almost invariably thinks immediately of playwright and poet William Shakespeare. For many, in fact, the placename *Stratford* has become synonymous with Shakespeare and his plays and for good reason.

There is Stratford, Connecticut, the location of the American Shakespeare Theatre from 1955 to 1982, with occasional summer Shakespeare festivals since then; Stratford, Ontario, where one finds the Stratford Shakespeare Festival, begun in 1953, and plays performed in its four theaters; and, of course, the city that started it all, the birthplace of the Bard, Stratford-upon-Avon, Warwickshire, England, with its Royal Shakespeare Theatre, home to the Royal Shakespeare Company since 1932. How, one might ask, did this immediate connection of place and person come about?

It all began in Stratford-upon-Avon with the house on Henley Street in which William Shakespeare is said to have been born. Referred to as the Birthplace, and beginning notably with the Victorians, it became revered almost as a shrine, and a visit to the site took on the manifestation of a pilgrimage, much in the way many in a previous era traveled to Canterbury. Those early pilgrims, however, traveled to the shrine of Thomas Becket at the cathedral where he was buried, not to the house where he was born.

As suggested in Thomas's book, one might rightly think that the basis of the association of Stratford with Shakespeare would be the fact that Shakespeare is buried in Holy Trinity Church within that city. Are we not more likely to visit the final resting place of famous writers, such as Jane Austen in Winchester Cathedral, Winchester, England, or Edgar Allan Poe at Westminster Hall and Burying Ground in Baltimore, Maryland? It is, however, the Birthplace that has been the main focus of the association between Stratford and Shakespeare, a focus that eclipses his connection with Holy Trinity Church and becomes an example of branding to the very highest degree.

By her own admission, the author states, "I did not set out to write a book about Shakespeare's Birthplace. The house crept up on me while I was undertaking research for another project. And once I had seen it, it would not go away" (156). For embracing the project to provide as much information as possible about the house, we and countless Shakespeare scholars are in her debt. This undertaking was definitely not an easy task. The Birthplace had remained in private hands—and not within the same family as had Anne Hathaway's Cottage—from the time of Shakespeare's death in 1616 until it was purchased at auction for £3,000 in 1847 by the London and Stratford Committees, two groups of private investors, later to become the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust.

At the time of the auction, the Birthplace was "not one but three premises: a cottage, which was built onto the northwest end of the house and at the time of Shakespeare's death was occupied by his sister, Joan Hart; a butcher shop in the middle, complete with an open hatched window; and on the right, the Swan and Maidenhead, the pub sign fixed prominently to the wall" (60). After its purchase "for the nation," plans were drawn up to attempt to return the structure to how it appeared at the time of Shakespeare, since in the intervening years many changes had taken place. What was original, what had been removed, and what had been added?

Thomas is a consummate researcher, and she studied and sought sources for information on the Birthplace from its earliest sources and at every possible angle. In the Introduction, titled "The Birthplace in Victorian Culture," she explains how Shakespeare fit in with the life and sensibilities

of the Victorians. In Chapter 1, “The Birth of ‘Shakespeare’,” Thomas explores what had, for want of another word, become the myth of Shakespeare’s birth and upbringing as it was imagined and even represented in etchings, engravings, and later photographs produced in the nineteenth century.

Chapter 2, “Bidding for the Bard: The Auction of the Birthplace,” chronicles the various and competing efforts to raise funds for the purchase of the house amid rumors that Shakespeare might not even have been born there, as well as the fear that it might be bought by P. T. Barnum and removed beam by stone by piece to America to be shown as a curiosity.

In Chapter 3, “Bringing Down the House: Restoring the Birthplace,” Thomas presents the very real dilemma that no one could be entirely certain what the house actually looked like in Shakespeare’s time. All that leads very easily into Chapter 4, “Real Estate: Authenticating the Birthplace.” Just as there are those who cannot believe that Shakespeare even wrote the plays that are attributed to him, there were those who questioned if he were actually born in the portion of the house on Henley Street that is referred to as the Birthplace. While his family may have lived as tenants on the property prior to and at the time of his birth, records show that his father, John Shakespeare, a glove maker, leather worker, and dealer in hides and wool, did not actually purchase that part of the house until several years after William was born.

The title for Chapter 5, “Eight Things to Do in Stratford-upon-Avon: A Guide for the Victorian Tourist,” is actually somewhat misleading, for the eight things are never enumerated or delineated. It is, however, an interesting chapter, drawing upon descriptions from actual guidebooks, travel writing, and memoirs of the period that described how people behaved and/or were meant to behave when visiting the Birthplace.

Finally, in the Conclusion, “The Place and the Plays,” Thomas refers to the several parallels between Shakespeare’s characters and people he knew or might have known in Stratford. She also reminds the reader again that it was the Birthplace that the early tourist came to see, for the Bard’s plays were not even performed in Stratford until 1879 with the construction of the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre. The first production was *As You Like It*, “which was set in an imaginary version of Warwickshire’s Forest of Arden” (165).

It is the author herself who aptly sums up her contribution to Shakespeare scholarship: “As this book has shown, Shakespeare’s Birthplace was essentially created by the Victorians, who inserted it into Shakespeare’s biography, bought and restored it for the nation, authenticated it, and placed it at the center of the Stratford tourist trail” (156).

The book is meticulously sourced. Notes for each of the numerous quotations and references to and from the work of others are provided in a separate section at the end of the book, and a substantial bibliography, including materials from the collection of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, is provided.

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Jane Austen’s Names: Riddles, Persons, Places. By MARGARET DOODY. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. 2015. Pp. 438. \$35.00. ISBN: 978-0-226-15783-2.

In Val McDermid’s 2015 updating of Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey*, would-be romantic heroine Catherine Morland laments the unsuitableness of her neighborhood as a potential locale for her story, solely based on her local villages’ names: “It would have been hard to make credible a romantic fiction set in Farleigh Piddle, Mid Piddle, Nether Piddle, and Piddle Dimmer” (1). Apparently, Margaret Doody, author of the highly engaging *Jane Austen’s Names: Riddles, Persons, Places*, is not the only one who has noticed Austen’s very intentional, often-playful, and at times sly, way with names.

Doody — John and Barbara Glynn Family Professor of Literature at the University of Notre Dame — has researched her topics painstakingly, drawing extensively from Austen’s own letters and