

Julia Thomas. *Shakespeare's Shrine: The Bard's Birthplace and the Invention of Stratford-upon-Avon*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012. ISBN: 978-0-8122-4423-6. Price: US\$34.95/£23.00.

Anjna Chouhan

Shakespeare Birthplace Trust

Shakespeare's Shrine is an insightful exploration of the Bard's Birthplace. That Shakespeare's global legacy as a man of Stratford-upon-Avon owes much to the nineteenth century's collective Bardolatry is a well-known fact. Moreover, that the home in which he was most likely to have been born was purchased in 1847 is no mystery. On the surface, therefore, Julia Thomas's book announces itself with a somewhat unoriginal premise: that the purchase of Shakespeare's Birthplace in the mid-nineteenth century contributed to the image of Stratford-upon-Avon as the origin and spiritual home of Shakespeare. However, though Thomas overlooks the influence of the eighteenth century on the image of Stratford inherited by the nineteenth century, some fascinating details emerge here. Quirky anecdotes and curious events come to light as the chapters progress, from the building of a replica Birthplace in Surrey to the burgeoning of souvenir books, pictures, and even small-scale model Birthplaces.

Thomas mostly derives her material from the memoir of Levi Fox, the Director of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust between 1945-1989, and also from newspapers, periodicals and various assorted publications and collections from the Birthplace archives. Facts, therefore, are woven together with speculation and anecdotes that often give the book an imaginative quality that makes it accessible to the general reader. One of the book's most exciting revelations is the objection of Marie Corelli to the Birthplace restoration scheme. Thomas

observes that Corelli frequently used the rhetoric of destruction in relation to the re-development of Stratford, in particular Henley Street itself. Another curious Corelli fact that emerges in Thomas's study is her dislike of American visitors, especially their behavior around hotels, confectioners' shops, and Holy Trinity Church. Such anecdotes give the book a sense of charm.

Structurally, Thomas takes her reader from the Birthplace and the Victorians in general, through the build-up to the purchase, to the restoration of the property and its perceived authenticity, culminating in a chapter about various tourist possibilities in Stratford-upon-Avon itself. The opening chapter is broad in its focus, sweeping over the Garrick jubilee, the growing culture of Shakespeare the man, and the recognition of Stratford-upon-Avon as a legitimate place of pilgrimage to pay homage to the supposedly "divine" (19) Bard.

While Thomas's generalizations about the period, and her over-use of phrases such as "meanings" (3), "multiple and contradictory meanings" (9), and "multiple identities" (14) of Shakespeare can sometimes feel wearing, the early stages of her book reveal snippets of the cultural world that contextualizes the purchase of the Birthplace. Verse, prose, pictorial works, and portraiture from the period all allow Thomas to explore shifting attitudes towards Shakespeare, particularly with reference to biography. In fact, this is where the book's strength lies: its exploration of the emergence of Shakespeare the man which, Thomas rather tantalizingly suggests, coincides with the Victorian conceptualization of home, hearth, and domesticity. Thomas draws on Charles Knight's biographical description of William and his mother gathered before the familial fireplace in a cozy Victorian re-imagining of a scene that would have been highly unlikely in the Elizabethan house. Using these romanticized tendencies that crept into Knight's illustrated biography, for instance, Thomas traces the emergence of a new kind of Shakespeare: a loving, homely, domestic man. This was an

image, albeit fictionalized and speculative, that was to inspire illustrators and painters throughout the second half of the nineteenth century.

While the book does imply that these radical imaginings of Shakespeare the homely youth were self-evidently fictionalized, there could be more exploration of the contemporary desperation to retain such fantasies. Knight's biography, for instance, is not simply a piece that luxuriates in the idolization of Shakespeare and his blissful childhood in Stratford-upon-Avon. Knight's writing is tinged with desperation or a kind of insecurity about a possible emergence of facts that could, at any moment, disprove the belief that the house was indeed the birthplace of Shakespeare. Assessing and revealing these insecurities about the fantasies, rather than listing the fantasies themselves, might have made the opening chapters in the book feel less generalized, and would have been a welcome addition. True, in Chapter 4 Thomas discusses the almost frantic efforts of J. O. Halliwell-Phillipps to collate documents and artifacts from the period of Shakespeare's lifetime in Stratford, but the sense of desperation and anxiety about authenticity would have been a more accurate assessment of the background to the creation of the Birthplace's mythology.

Thomas occasionally draws towards a scholarly discussion about her material, particularly when engaging with the question of ownership of Shakespeare and national identity, in the wake of railway expansion and simultaneous economic crisis. This, she argues, was bound up in the rhetoric of urgency that surrounded ownership discourse in the year preceding the purchase. This leads to a discussion of the anxiety about Shakespeare in the global marketplace, particularly given the hysteria surrounding the Bard in America. With economic woe in Britain in the 1840s, British donations to the Birthplace languished. However, when the notorious showman P.T. Barnum planned to buy the house and ship the entire property to America, newspapers seized upon the story as a scandal, frightening the various committees into scaring up British funds for the auction. This reactionary re-

imagining of the Birthplace sale ties in neatly with Thomas's claim that the house's success derived from the fact that it belonged to the people and not to any one individual. In many ways, this secured the Birthplace's position in the collective national conscience as a genuine and ideologically worthy heritage site.

Thomas moves on to recount the restoration of the house, noting the critical input of J. P. Collier, John Ruskin, and Edward Barry, the son of the architect who designed the Houses of Parliament, to name a few. An interesting conflict is noted in Chapter 3 about the difference between the romanticized vision of what the Birthplace *should* look like and what it, in fact, *would* have looked like. Thomas alludes to eighteenth-century imagined illustrations of the house and their influence over the reconstruction of the façade; certainly, the house's trustees invested heavily in this kind of image over and above antiquarian accuracy.

A very plausible conclusion that Thomas draws in this book concerns the significance of visualizing the Birthplace through illustrations, paintings, and photographs that transformed the timber-frame edifice, in the imagination at least, into a domestic, comfortable home. In fact, the arrival of photography is something that provides Thomas with an innovative perspective on the Birthplace in the nineteenth century. Rather than romanticized illustrations in newspapers and souvenir books, photographs—albeit staged and quasi-fictional—gave the impression of authenticity, and once visitors themselves began to bring cameras into the house, the Birthplace took on another life as an object for ocular consumption.

The final chapter offers insight into various tourist possibilities in the town itself. From walking tours and guide books to Shuttery trips and excursions to Charlecote, Stratford-upon-Avon is depicted as an accessible and financially-successful tourist location, and

Thomas offers some intriguing information about house entry prices and even sleepover parties that allegedly took place in the Birthplace.

In addition, the proper mode of expressing admiration for Shakespeare became a subject of debate within the context of preserving the house. Graffiti on the windows and walls was becoming tiresome and, more interestingly, it blurred distinctions between the names of the powerful and famous and those of workers and laymen, causing much rank-related scandal. And this is where Thomas begins to suggest that tourist rituals, like signing guestbooks and etching names into the windows, acquired more significance than understanding or appreciating the value of physically being in Shakespeare's house. Thus the book delivers its promise of explaining the "invention" of Stratford-upon-Avon as worthy of tourist attention and, more importantly, investment.

Thomas ends her study by claiming that she had never intended to write about Shakespeare's Birthplace, but that she was seduced by the presence of the house in her examination of Shakespeare discourse from the period. While this is admirable, it is not entirely revelatory. Yet this is perhaps what lends Thomas's book its charm: it is an enlightening read for the generally interested reader and, in truth, it never announces itself as groundbreaking. Current scholarship on Shakespeare in the nineteenth century is referred to rather than explored and sometimes tricky subjects are brushed over very lightly, especially the reasons behind the connection between Shakespeare and the rhetoric of religion: after all, the book is called *Shakespeare's Shrine*. Nevertheless, this all provides a useful background for the overall sense of the Bard's significance in the period that Thomas establishes in order to deal with the "invention" of the Birthplace itself. *Shakespeare's Shrine* engages with some interesting material, and is a lively exploration of the period that brought Shakespeare and Stratford together for the benefit of the nation and the entire world.

Biographical Notice:

Anjna Chouhan is Lecturer in Shakespeare Studies at the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust in Stratford-upon-Avon. She completed her PhD on Shakespeare and the Church on the Victorian stage at the University of Leicester in 2012, and has edited a sourcebook on the actor-manager Henry Irving for the Pickering and Chatto series, *Lives of Shakespearian Actors*. Chouhan has represented the Shakespeare Birthplace on television and news programmes, and delivered the Shakespeare Anniversary TES webinar in April 2013. She is currently collaborating with Cambridge University Press on a digital Shakespeare resource for secondary schools.