

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



**Hannah Crawforth, Sarah Dustagheer & Jennifer Young, *Shakespeare in London*
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In the twin interests, we may reasonably infer, of audience-luring exoticism and political expediency, none of his plays was exclusively set there. Yet, few scholars dissent from the view that Venice, Padua, Sicily, Bohemia, Cyprus, ancient Britain and Rome are, on Shakespeare's stage, thinly veiled versions of the same city: London. More dimly understood are the links between individual texts and those *specific* features of the capital — geographic, social, economic, legal, religious and political — in which the dramatist was evidently, over many years, deeply immersed. As Hannah Crawforth states in the introduction, his familiarity with the Metropolis was such that 'the size, diversity, noise, smell, chaos, anarchy and sheer excitement of London can be felt in all that Shakespeare writes' (p. 2). Focusing on a single play and key setting in each chapter, Crawforth and her co-authors proceed to pinpoint where, why and how Shakespeare's London pervades his dramas.

Following a violence-oriented opening chapter on *Titus Andronicus* and Tyburn, chapter 2, on politics, accomplishes these aims with particular sensitivity and authority. Twinning *Richard II* with Whitehall, Crawforth's thesis is that Shakespeare, the court playwright, knew intimately how political power was wielded in London, and assiduously incorporated this knowledge into the play's language and structure. Atypical of his dramatic corpus in featuring a number of actual London scenes, *Richard II* reveals important features of Shakespeare's city. John of Gaunt's celebrated 'sceptred isle' speech in Act 2 is especially illuminating in this respect. London, where, in opulent Ely House, the dying Gaunt ruminates, is not unnaturally figured by the speaker as a 'teeming womb of royal kings'. Yet the depiction in the routinely overlooked latter part of the monologue is of an England — a London — plagued by perceived injustice and concomitant simmering tension. The recent built environment imposes itself here, for

Gaunt had, Crawford reminds us, experienced a more menacing aspect of the capital: in 1381 his great palace on the site of the modern Savoy Hotel was razed to the ground by rebels, presaging the serious civil conflict which was to mire Richard's regime. Later in the play, Richard's comparing of his crown to a 'deep well' uses imagery prompted, the author suggests, by the physical presence of such a well just outside Westminster Hall, as identified on a contemporary map by John Norden. Those gathered to see the king uncrowned would have passed it on their way inside, instancing a sovereign and signally rewarding theme of the book: Shakespeare's 'rendering the most exceptional of states more vividly by firmly placing them within the common experiences of his first London audiences' (p. 63).

After a chapter on class, which insightfully links *Romeo and Juliet* with the Strand, chapter 4 establishes ties between *The Merchant of Venice* and Shakespeare's experience of the law, in what was a strikingly litigious early modern London. When he began writing the play Shakespeare's own acting company, the Lord Chamberlain's Men, found itself in an invidious legal position. Having lost its lease at the Theatre, in Shoreditch, it entered into a bond with the Swan's owner, Francis Langley, which, should the company perform anywhere other than at his venue, required it to forfeit the princely sum of £100. Given the central plotline of the financially punitive, ultimately life-threatening bond between Antonio and Shylock, the potential influence of this off-stage arrangement becomes readily apparent.

The Inns of Court, and Shakespeare's close association with them, are this chapter's main focus of attention, however. The 'moot debates' intrinsic to law students' studies, in which forensic questioning skills were honed, find memorable expression in Portia's cross-examining of the participants in the climactic Venetian courtroom scene. The same scene, it is cogently argued, illuminates the tensions between distinctive elements in the legal codes of the city. On this innovatively secular reading, the collision between Old and New Testament values long discerned in this scene gives place to another, more London-centric, binary: the relative rigidity of the commons law versus the flexibility and equitability of the courts of Chancery.

The religious impulses in Shakespeare's plays are obdurately difficult to disentangle. Chapter 5, by Jennifer Young, demonstrates how viewing Shakespeare's religion through the critical optic of location can bring greater clarity. Coupling *Hamlet* with the Cathedral and churchyard of St Paul's, and their contrasting images of sacred and secular, Young sees the fractured, nascent Protestant, religious milieu of Elizabethan London as pivotal to Hamlet's inner and outer tension, and hence to the energy infusing the entire play. The parvenu Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are — intriguingly —

equated with the social climbers whom Shakespeare would have witnessed using Paul's Walk, the short-cut from Ludgate to Cheapside which went through the middle aisle of the Cathedral. More significantly, the largescale iconoclasm which had taken place at the Cathedral in 1547 is held to bleed into the Catholic doctrinal issues addressed in the play, including the ambivalent purgatory in which Old Hamlet's ghost dwells, the contested burials of Polonius and Ophelia, and the aborted murder of Claudius at prayer. Meanwhile, Shakespeare's mooted acquaintance with the Churchyard, locus of the London book trade, reverberates with a play 'infused with the culture of critical examination and self-discovery associated with Protestant programmes of reading' (p. 138).

The association of *King Lear*, in chapter 6, with Bethlehem Hospital, or Bedlam, yields noteworthy aperçus into early modern attitudes towards medicine. In examining his symptoms alongside contemporary accounts of mental illness, Crawford seeks to identify evidence of the precise nature of Lear's condition. Shakespeare's understanding of the world of mental illness may have been informed, she argues, by his appearing at the trial in 1602 of a fellow actor of the Lord Chamberlain's Men, Christopher Beeston, accused of raping an inmate of Bedlam's sister institution, Bridewell prison. Moreover, in the same way that, as modern scholarship has increasingly come to appreciate, the governors of Bedlam tried sedulously to cultivate sympathy — rather than voyeurism — in its visitors, so Lear 'evokes the figure of the Bedlam beggar precisely in order to make the same plea for empathy amongst its audience members' (p. 165). Further judicious analysis is undertaken by Sarah Dustagheer in chapters 7 and 8, which respectively consider economics (*Timon of Athens* and the King's Bench Prison, Southwark) and scientific experimentation (*The Tempest* and Lime Street).

Given the faintness of Shakespeare's biographical footprint in London (and elsewhere, for that matter), a volume of this sort is inevitably exposed to the charge of over-dependence on conjecture and imagination. And, while we never enter the realm of historical fiction, there are occasions here, to be sure, when the recurrence of terms such as 'Shakespeare would have' known this location, or 'might have' frequented that, begins to pall. However, the authors are to be congratulated on exploring in fresh and exciting ways the thin shards of evidence at their disposal, and also, for the most part, on the more speculative locational evidence they adduce. Augmented by the usual apparatus of the Arden Shakespeare series, including a chronology, eight illustrations and suggested further reading, this study evokes a palpable, powerful sense of Shakespeare's London and the numerous ways in which it permeated his playwriting.