Shakespeare's House of Cards: An Anniversary Celebration

by David P. Gontar (July 2016)

Shakespeare's supposed birthplace, Stratford

On March 10, 1613 the renowned English playwright William Shakespeare bought for 140 pounds a dwelling place in Blackfriars, London. This innocent act perplexes a few renegade antiquarians who ask, Since the gentleman retired to Stratford-on-Avon in that self-same year of 1613, where he spent his sunset years from 1613 to 1616, how and why did he acquire a London residence when, presumably, he was just vacating one? As we have his clumsy signature on the deed, he must have been in London in March, perfected the acquisition of the Blackfriars property, and set off for New Place in Stratford, the country home he'd acquired in 1597. The BBC further piques our curiosity by declaring that he actually moved into New Place "permanently" in *1610*. ("Shakespeare's Last House," BBC, 12/22/13) Under this scenario the dramatist leaves the comfort of his estate in Stratford and travels all the way back to London to the Blackfriars act of sale. Since he never lived there we must suppose that he returned posthaste to New Place. Which tale is true? What difference does it make to us Bardolators, who'd believe William tried to blow up Parliament with Guy Fawkes if that's what the latest news is.

Of course, there'd be no mystery if there happened to be two people named William Shakespeare, one of whom buys New Place in Stratford, and another, entirely different, fellow with the same name, who gets the Blackfriars digs. But . . . more than one *William Shakespeare*?? Impossible. What a silly idea! Everyone knows there was only one guy with that crazy name . . . Right?

Wrong. Turns out there was a whole passel of Will Shakespeares running around back then. Didn't they tell you? Mrs. C.C. Stopes, indefatigable and precise genealogist, devoted years to rummaging through musty archives researching the whole Shakespeare clan, publishing her undisputed findings in 1901 as *Shakespeare's Family*. Combing through tax rolls, birth and death records,

marriage and baptismal documents, in all pertinent counties, Mrs. Stopes discovered the astonishing fact of Shakespearean Plurality.

In the standard model (one and only one William Shakespeare) the William of Stratford who is present at the baptism of his twins in 1585 is the same fellow who acquires notoreity in London in 1592 with his line about a tiger's heart wrapped in a woman's hide from the third part of *King Henry VI*. A corollary of that identity means that young William traveled to London and entered the theatrical profession, an idea not reflected in any document but presumably a natural and necessary inference. If, on the other hand, there existed a plurality of persons bearing that name, the same name in Stratford and in London might mean one fellow in Stratford and another in London.

It will be remembered that William of Stratford acquired New Place in Warwickshire County in 1597. But per Mrs. Stopes that is the year that a William Shakespeare was assessed in St. Helens Parish, London for monies owed: 1597. The entry is "Affid. William Shakespeare on v. goods, assessed xiii iiiid." Notice the correct spelling of "Shakespeare." Mrs. Stopes comments, "The 'affid.' affixed to it shows that the Shakespeare named tried to avoid payment on some grounds." (Stopes, 143) To make all these odds even nothing more is needed than to treat these two Shakespeares as one and the same. Yet that is precisely what genealogist Mrs. Stopes declines to do.

> It has surprised many, and satisfied others as suitable, that the poet should have lived in this neighborhood, near so many of his theatrical friends. <u>But I do not think it certainly proved that it was our Shakespeare at all</u>. Two references of Collier seem to locate him in Southwark in 1596, and in 1609, near the site of the Globe Theatre. <u>Several of the name</u> lived near Bishopsgate before and after his death. (Stopes, 143)

That is, it seems unlikely that the William of Stratford and those "several" in London were all one and the same peripatetic fellow. Here, then, is a bit of a sticky wicket for the traditional narrative. In the plethora of Shakespeares, which one is "our Shakespeare," the poet? What criteria shall we employ? Who bought the Blackfriar's dwelling — William of Stratford? William of St. Helens Parish? One of the "several of the name"?

The issue looming is larger than real estate. It naturally bears on the matter

of authorship. Suppose we have a young man in the village of Stratford and another inhabiting the theater district of London. Who would be the likelier author of the corpus? If we opt for the latter what becomes of the "sweet swan of Avon" of the First Folio? Why then should we suppose that anyone named "Shakespeare" wrote the works if the story of the Stratford poet turns out to be apocryphal – and better, non-William, candidates are well known?

Of course it's fairly clear why Mrs. Stopes was not eager to merge "our poet" with the resident of St. Helens Parish. For the record shows that one "William Shakespeare" was a bit of a shady character. He was a grain hoarder who sold at exorbitant prices in dearths. He was also a usurious money lender who frequently sued for monies owed him while playing the artful dodger as to his own financial obligations. There is no way to comfortably merge this profile with the high-minded author of *The Merchant of Venice*. It's easy to agree with Mrs. Stopes: "our poet" surely could not have been that sort of person. Realizing that there were multiple Shakespeares shields us from that unpleasant picture, but at the same time it opens the door to the very real possibility that none of these "William Shakespeares" was the mysterious poet we love and admire.

Stratfordian apologists are fond of reciting a little tautology in defense of their *Weltanschauung*: "Shakespeare wrote Shakespeare." There was a time when such a soothing jingle might have promised a refuge from controversy. But the gambit succeeded when there was but a single Shakespeare. Add "several" and the adage becomes meaningless. Some now cling to the idea that the dwelling place in Blackfriar's was a "safehouse" for recusant Catholics, and since the Stratford man was himself a recusant Catholic, it was he who bought that apartment. But that inference only served when it was taken as self-evident that there was one and only one "William Shakespeare." No one has proved that the author of the plays and poems was a recusant Catholic, and there is plenty of evidence that this idea is false. The fact is that which William bought the Blackfriar's residence is a question impossible to answer.

With the realization that there were any number of William Shakespeares in London and beyond, the conventional story of the young genius who moves to London to become the star of his age and the world's most acclaimed literary artist collapses into a pile of rubbish. Shakespeare's house is shown to be a house of cards. Anyone who now wants to defend a "Shakespeare" as our poet now must explain which one is meant – and why. We wish them good luck.

WORKS CITED:

C.C. Stopes, *Shakespeare's Family*, New York, James Pott and Company, 1901.

BBC, "Shakespeare's Last House," 12/22/13

David P. Gontar's latest book is *Hamlet Made Simple and Other Essays*, New English Review Press, 2013.

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