

Reviews

Living with Shakespeare: Saint Helen's Parish, London, 1593–1598. By GEOFFREY MARSH. Pp. x + 502 + 170 colour images, 9 tables, index. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021. £25. ISBN 978-1-474-47972-1. Hardback.

We know that William Shakespeare was living in the London parish of Saint Helen's in 1598 because a tax assessment puts him there. In this comprehensively and scrupulously documented book, Geoffrey Marsh sets before the reader every possible piece of contextual information with which to flesh out that single raw fact, principally concerning the other Saint Helen's residents around this time. Saint Helen's lies about 500 metres west of modern Aldgate underground railway station and Marsh's main sources are its parish records and those of the Leathersellers' Company, which owned about 20 per cent of the parish's buildings. From these, Marsh gives best-guess deductions of just where in the parish Shakespeare lived, right down to a modern street address (35 Great Saint Helen's), whom he lived with (the clerk of the Leathersellers', John Hatton), and when he moved there (around 1593). He also traces every possible connection between Shakespeare's experience of living in the Saint Helen's parish and the writings he has left us.

Marsh's first chapters sketch the economic and social context of the religious persecution of Protestants, especially in the Spanish Netherlands, resulting in a wave of refugees to London — 10–15 per cent of Saint Helen's residents in the 1590s were such foreigners — and a shift in trade from Antwerp to Amsterdam and London. In all, Saint Helen's held around 90–100 households totalling 450–600 people. Their occupations reveal that it was an upmarket district with residents involved in the newest and most exciting economic adventures, including financing overseas exploration and trade. The burgeoning theatre industry was like these new overseas ventures in being organized as joint-stock companies outside the traditional guild system. For actors and adventurers alike, there was no guild safety net in the event of failure but conversely no guild regulations to limit profits in the event of success. And as Marsh shows, already by 1598 (less than half way into his career) Shakespeare's personal economic success put him in the top quarter of the wealthiest residents of this select neighbourhood.

Marsh discovers that several Saint Helen's residents were connected with the new theatre industry, including John Pryn who brokered a mortgage on the Theatre in Shoreditch in 1579. Another was the moneylender Israel Jorden who financed the actor Robert Browne, leader of the Derby's Men playing company, in setting up the Boar's Head theatre in Aldgate. Only occasionally are Marsh's links as strained as the one concerning Saint Helen's resident Robert Honeywood whose 'brother-in-law was stepfather to the dedicatee of Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*', Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton (315). Even when tenuous, the connections are valuable. Honeywood had an aunt whose father-in-law was the judge Sir James Hales, whose suicide by drowning created the legal precedent mocked in the discussion of Ophelia's drowning in *Hamlet*.

The payoff of all this biographical investigation is not so much in connections to Shakespeare's art that can be substantiated but in the development of a sense of the social world in which that art flourished. Madrigal writer and publisher Thomas Morley lived and ran

his press in Saint Helen's, producing in 1600 a book containing the words and music for the song 'It was a Lover and his Lass' that is sung in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*. We do not know if the words were already in existence before Shakespeare used them in the play, but it seems likely that Morley's music was used in the early performances. John Stow lived near to Saint Helen's parish and his famously large library would have been useful to Shakespeare, who depended heavily on written sources. These men need not have known each other, of course, and Marsh is careful not to insist on any of his many well-informed speculations about the intersections of art, biography, economics, and neighbourliness.

When did Shakespeare move to Saint Helen's? Marsh reckons it unlikely that Shakespeare would have intentionally lodged in an area that put him close to the arch-enemy of the theatre, Lord Mayor Sir John Spencer, who arrived in Saint Helen's in late 1593 or early 1594. So, Marsh reckons Shakespeare was there first and entertains the possibility that Shakespeare went straight to Saint Helen's upon his arrival in London in the mid- or late-1580s. But it being such an exclusive area, this seems unlikely: there is no reason to think that Shakespeare was well off before he became a successful actor and author and new immigrants tend to first lodge in cheap districts.

Because it figures so largely in the records, Marsh devotes much of his narrative to the plague. His historically informed account of one family's suffering provides an especially poignant opening to the book and the extraordinary toll of the plague on the most unlucky families — child after child, spouse after spouse suddenly taken — forms a leitmotif. As Marsh repeatedly points out, the plague was no respecter of social distinction and their better living conditions gave the well-off only a marginally better chance of survival.

In pursuing every conceivable lead for every identifiable historical person, Marsh's story of this fascinating parish is likewise only slightly skewed in favour of the richest and most powerful, who of course leave us the fullest records of their lives. His accounts of strangers, servants, and minor citizens are as compelling as those of the famous residents including Sir John Spencer, Sir Humpfrey Gilbert, and Sir Thomas Gresham. Marsh's book is long, lavishly illustrated, and minutely detailed in its documentation, but written in a conversational tone that comfortably addresses a broad spectrum of readers. In so vividly putting Shakespeare among the rich variety of Saint Helen's parish, Marsh has done a service to the history of London and to the history of Shakespeare's life and milieu.