



Preface

Katherine Scheil

According to actor Nick Asbury, Stratford-upon-Avon is ‘a wonderful, strange, old place ... a place of dreams’.¹ As the site of literary pilgrimage since the eighteenth century, the home of the Royal Shakespeare Company and the topic of hundreds of imaginary portrayals, Stratford is ripe for analysis, both in terms of its factual existence and its fictional afterlife. The chapters in this volume consider the various manifestations of the physical and metaphorical town on the Avon, across time, genre and place, from America to New Zealand, from children’s literature to wartime commemorations. We meet many Stratfords in this collection, real and imaginary, and the interplay between the two generates new visions of the place. The chapters in this collection, summarised in Nicola Watson’s afterword, begin to write a history of these imagined Stratfords.

Every reimagining of Stratford assembles a combination of real locales such as Holy Trinity Church, the Henley Street Birthplace, Anne Hathaway’s Cottage and New Place, and adds a notion of ‘Shakespeare’ to produce a particular conception of ‘Stratford’. These

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various town landmarks also reveal their own narratives of Stratford. A fixture in Stratford since 1210, Holy Trinity Church has inspired scholars as well as tourists, relic hunters and would-be grave robbers. As Clara Calvo writes in her chapter for this collection, even a single window in Holy Trinity Church (the American Memorial Window) can have its own ‘cultural biography’ (61) connecting Shakespeare, Stratford and international relations. The changing physical spaces of the geographical Stratford, such as the excavation of Shakespeare’s last home New Place and the re-opening of the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre, provide fodder for what Nicola Watson calls in her afterword ‘recognisably new stories’ (94) waiting to be told.

Imaginative portrayals of Stratford comprise a significant portion of material on Stratford. From the young adult fiction that Susanne Greenhalgh covers in her chapter to detective novels, conceptions of Stratford resonate outside its geographical and temporal boundaries, disseminating ideas of Englishness and ‘Shakespeare country’ well beyond the local community. Katherine Scheil’s contribution to this collection traces the various places around the world that have sought to call ‘Stratford’ home, in New Zealand and New Jersey alike.

In addition to the thousands of tourists who visit year-round, various other pilgrims have left their marks on Stratford, reshaping the space for various personal and public purposes. Stratford has a long tradition as an actor’s town, from travelling players who visited during Shakespeare’s lifetime, through contemporary actors with the Royal Shakespeare Company. Many of these actors have had a major role in shaping the later history of Stratford. Actor Thomas Betterton was the first to research the details of Shakespeare’s life for Nicholas Rowe’s seminal 1709 biography, and actor David Garrick inaugurated the Stratford tourist trade with his 1769 Shakespeare Jubilee. Christy Desmet’s chapter on Helen Fauci traces the town through one actress’s experience, looking at the junction between ‘what Helen Fauci meant to Stratford and what the Stratford experience meant to her’ (5).

The history of Stratford has been told by historians, archaeologists, Bardolators and anti-Bardolators alike, and through individuals or collectively through groups. Stratford might also be analysed through different modes of perception – through walking tours (as Julie Sanders shows in her chapter), tourist experiences and armchair travellers. ‘Stratford’ can even exist outside Warwickshire – in

New Zealand, Canada and America.² Future work might explore the collective experience of tourist groups who visit the Stratford properties, as well as the experiences of various national groups.³

Even anti-Stratfordians have not been immune to this ‘wonderful strange old place’. American anti-Stratfordian Delia Bacon made the ‘last expedition of her life’ to Stratford, where she planned to open the tomb of Shakespeare and discover papers revealing the real authorship of the plays.⁴ Bacon wrote in 1856, ‘I love to be here. Those beautiful trees and that church spire look a little like dream-land to me’.⁵ The many reconstructions of the ‘dream-land’ of ‘Stratford’ in literature, art and around the globe suggest that ideas of Stratford will continue to circulate and metamorphose for many years to come, providing what Nicola Watson aptly calls in her concluding piece, ‘a reservoir of creativity’ (97).

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Notes

1. Nick Asbury, *Exit Pursued by a Badger: An Actor’s Journey Through History with Shakespeare* (London: Oberon Books, 2009), 26–27.
2. Readers might appreciate the irony in the fact that the chapters in this volume originated at a Shakespeare Association of America seminar on the topic of ‘Stratford’, held in Seattle, Washington in 2010 – perhaps the most geographically distant locale in the U.S. from Stratford.
3. The Birthplace Trust, for instance, offers a guidebook of all five properties in French, Spanish, Italian, German, Russian, Japanese and Mandarin. The Birthplace Trust properties encourage group visits, even offering after hours options for ‘intimate access’ to the Shakespeare Houses, with options for champagne receptions, candle-lit tours, costumed guides and performances of excerpts from Shakespeare by actors. Shakespeare Birthplace Trust Group Visits and Tours mailer, 2012–13.
4. Theodore Bacon, *Delia Bacon: A Biographical Sketch* (Cambridge, Mass: Riverside Press, 1888), 235.
5. Bacon, 241. Letter to Sophia Hawthorne, August 1856.