

# EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



**Geoffrey Marsh, *Living With Shakespeare: Saint Helen's Parish, London, 1583-1598.***  
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Closely examining the 1597 and 1598 Lay Subsidy Rolls of Saint Helen's Parish and the records of the Leathersellers' Company Estate along with other archives of documents, letters, deeds, and court minutes of the day, Geoffrey Marsh speculates quite persuasively in *Living With Shakespeare: Saint Helen's Parish, London, 1583-1598* about the early years when William Shakespeare was in residence in London.

Marsh's premise is that while William Shakespeare lived and worked in London for approximately twenty years, about five of those were spent within the boundaries of St. Helen's Parish near Bishopsgate and directly across the River Thames from the nascent theatre district where he worked. 'It seems most likely that he lived on the north side of the churchyard end of Great St. Helen's [...] among a community of highly gifted individuals embracing specialisms ranging from medicine to music' (p. 195). Marsh's skillful weaving of what he calls a 'micro-history' (p. 4) of multiple strands combining history, social movement, politics, literature, world exploration, mercantilism, and medicine convincingly establishes a possible nexus in which Shakespeare's genuine interest in the human condition could percolate to create memorable characters and plot elements for plays he would yet write. Indeed, it was in Saint Helen's Parish that he solidified his reputation as a reliable playwright, writing about ten plays during this early period including *Romeo and Juliet*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and *Richard II* (p. 133).

Saint Helen's Parish, which still exists today, was then a remnant of a nunnery and medieval priory that 'fell to forced closure by the dissolution and royal seizure of monastic properties in 1538': its buildings 'were not destroyed but were adapted to new uses and much of the complex sold to other entities which remodeled them for different uses, including housing, small businesses, and as the main commercial hub for the Leathersellers' Guild' (p. 149). The nuns' chapel itself remained a church under the auspices of the Church of England.

As a community, the inhabitants ranged from the wealthy and politically significant to the poorest unknowns. Among them — both before and after Shakespeare's tenancy — were those who influenced the exploration of the world, funded and worked for the overseas establishment of the empire, promoted long-lasting reforms in finance and education, established legal precedence, and devised new medical procedures concerning madness, melancholia, and suicide. Marsh's point is that the historical memory of the area would surely have been recounted to the new resident by his neighbours as testimony of the area's importance, helping to create 'debate and professional expertise' (p. 176), upon which a young playwright might draw.

Yet Marsh is careful to present the parish of Saint Helen's as a thriving, reputable, and quiet neighbourhood suitably situated for a hard-working author of growing fame, that it might 'illuminate the life and work of our greatest playwright' (p. 20). While the multiplicity of threads that he examines so masterfully is extensive, Marsh's division of the project into workable sections allows him to be extremely detailed. The three chapters of Part I set up the history crucial to the reader's understanding of where and when. Four additional chapters make up Part II which establish the history (p. 1576-1598) of the burgeoning theatre world in which Shakespeare will find himself, including the establishment of earlier theatres prior to Shakespeare's arrival in London. Parts III and IV closely examine the use of St. Helen's Parish buildings and grounds, providing readers with a valuable description of what the playwright might have been able to see, hear, and glean from living in the area. Part V's four chapters examine the doctors, lawyers, intelligentsia, minor politicians, and musicians of the community whom Shakespeare may have known from attending church there. Part VI explores the influence of three separate episodes of witchcraft in London while Part VII continues a discussion of exploration by England and the influence of commerce due to importation of sugar. An extensive Appendix of nine nearly stand-alone essays augment details given in the larger sections and attempts to pinpoint Shakespeare's actual lodging, while others examine specific property owners to determine who may have been his landlord.

Again, skillfully venturing enough to be interesting to modern scholars and using what Shakespeare perhaps saw and heard around him, Marsh repeatedly suggests that Shakespeare used Saint Helen's Parish as inspiration. For example, Marsh draws a comparison between Hermia's difficulties at the beginning of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to the story of Sir John Spencer who 'famously tried to stop his daughter Elizabeth [...] from marrying her choice of husband, William Compton' (pp. 188-189) even serving time in prison for 'contempt and hiding away his daughter' (p. 190). Or the inspiration could have come from the marriage of Elizabeth Robinson, daughter of Alderman John Robinson the Elder who 'lived on the other side of Shakespeare's likely residence' (p. 188), for which her father reduced her inheritance to £10 for willfully marrying Thomas Jefferies in September 1596 (p. 188). Yet, even as Marsh points out such connections between the events and the play, he reminds us that we 'must be very careful about pushing such possible associations without firm evidence as marriage negotiations were probably frequent and on-going' (p. 188). Other examples of local events that might have coloured Shakespeare's writing, such as the apprentice riots of June 1595 which may have appeared in the opening confrontation between the servants in *Romeo and Juliet* (n. 192); that a local man named Andrew Elbow so amused him that he named a constable in *Measure for Measure* for him (pp. 194-195); and that the tomb of John Spencer may have impacted Bassanio's description of Portia in *The Merchant of Venice* (p. 238).

Additionally, Marsh spends three chapters towards the end of the book discussing well known cases of witchcraft in London as sources for or influences on *Macbeth*, although Shakespeare didn't actually write the play until several years after he left the parish. His suggestion that the social upheaval and resulting community gossip was all grist for the playwright's mill certainly cannot be proved, but it is believable. However, even given the long examination of the three cases, it may be a stretch to suggest there is enough information to pinpoint this as a factor as much as simply noting that it was part of the atmosphere amplified by James I's influence and interest in witchcraft.

In spite of the massive amount of information Marsh deals with here, the book is surprisingly readable and engaging, never failing to capture and hold one's imagination. Part of his success must be the inclusion of the many photographs of original documents, maps, charts, letters, and artwork to show readers how actual data and speculation tie together. Given both the broad historical approach and the discussion of minute details, they help provide clarity and greatly enhance one's understanding of the connections Marsh is making. This is particularly valuable in Part II of the book which focuses on the struggles James Burbage encountered as he sought to establish a viable theatre enterprise. Details here include even the cost of running a theatre on a

daily basis as well as the costs of building the structure and renting the land. Similarly, Marsh's extensive footnotes ending each chapter are highly informative as they go well beyond mere source citations to flesh out details or asides in the main text. They should not be skipped by the reader as they enhance one's insight greatly and are as readable as the main text.

While speculation is a major theme of Marsh's work, he writes skillfully and convincingly. Perhaps it is a factor of our own wishes to 'know' Shakespeare that we are susceptible to his suggestions that this member or that member of the parish may have influenced his thinking and that we can, indeed, identify that influence in his characters and plot twists. It seems highly likely that Shakespeare would have been inspired by the denizens of St. Helen's such as chemists, apothecaries, merchants, churchmen, doctors, politicians, those accused of witchcraft, willful daughters, and moneylenders as well as events such as death, marriage, childbirth, physical disputes, feuds, and local events of note. Although no absolute connections to Shakespeare can be stated with absolute authority, Marsh's speculation that these inhabitants of Saint Helen's Parish who were known to Shakespeare as fellow church goers or neighbours, provided inspiration for his plays is both a logical and reasonable conclusion. Taken together, this examination serves as a valuable resource for literary and historical scholars and should not be missed.