



## Introduction

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Despite claims that Shakespeare's plays are 'filled with evasions of the urban' and they 'deliberately bypass the teeming life, not only of contemporary London, but of cities generally' (Barton 305), the dramatist has played a pivotal role in shaping popular, contemporary conceptions and embodiments of early modern London. In other words, rightly or wrongly, it is through him that we now access (modern renderings of) early modern London. You can buy and use Nicholas Robins' *Walking Shakespeare's London* (2004), with its '20 original walks in and around London', or *William Shakespeare's London: A Commemorative Souvenir of Shakespearean London*, featuring, among other items, reproductions of portraits of Shakespeare's contemporaries, and the 1572 Braun and Hogenberg panorama of the city. Moreover, a disproportionate number of films and novels set in Renaissance London are either based on his works or feature him as a character, as an eminently marketable hook. Scholars and audiences interested in other authors in the city at the time might bemoan this focus as narrowing and reductive; plus, let's remember, Shakespeare wasn't even a Londoner! But, of course, we might suggest that his status as an outsider gave him what Steven Mullaney so influentially identified as a 'critical distance...a range of slightly eccentric or decentered perspectives' (30-31) which he shared with the stages for which he wrote, and which have some purchase and pull for anyone, like us all now, who is not themselves of early modern London. We might contend that modern London's accommodation of many who were not, but become, 'Londoners' (a term revived in *Henry VIII*) makes that figuring of Shakespeare ever more significant.

So too, does Shakespeare's engagement with the city's many competing voices. In *Coriolanus*, the conniving tribune Sicinus asks: 'What is the city but the people?' (3.1.232). His words seek to manipulate the citizens, but he's right: a city

cannot exist without its people, whether or not it is a fictional Rome which shares (and was the source of) many of London's features. Seen another way, the city makes the people, and helps them see themselves. The same play, obviously notable for its arguments, militarism and violence, offers a vision of something like an early modern urban utopia in 4.6. made by the people. There Sicinus describes seeing 'Our tradesmen singing in their shops and going / About their functions friendly'. This is short-lived though, as Coriolanus comes to 'melt the city', because it is an urban world too focussed on the (emasculating and ignoble) 'work' of a 'commonwealth' of 'apron-men'. Finding Shakespeare thinking about and staging these kinds of cities concurs with what Crawforth, Dustagheer and Young have recently argued in *Shakespeare in London* (2015) and Catharine Arnold in *Globe: Life in Shakespeare's London* (2015): the city's contradictions and conflicts played a central role in shaping *his* imagination. His drama, like the work of those with whom he collaborated and competed, was made possible by the city: its concentration of theatres, actors, audiences, fellow writers, publishers and patrons, unprecedented in these islands. We have already intimated the ways understandings of the early modern city, past and present, are mediated through Shakespeare in ways that rework Sicinus' question: 'What is the city but Shakespeare?' We might, however, attempt another reworking: 'What is Shakespeare but the city?' Thus, even though Shakespeare rarely wrote about London, preferring to set his plays in foreign and fantastical places, and he never condescended—or rose—to penning a city comedy (a highly-localized genre), arguably 'the size, diversity, noise, smell, chaos, anarchy and sheer excitement of London can be felt in all that [he] wrote' (Crawforth et. al.). Unearthing the presence of London within his *oeuvre*, which according to Crawforth et al. is replete with covert references to Tyburn, Whitehall, the Strand and the Tower, is a burgeoning subfield in Shakespeare Studies—as Nina Levine's latest book, *Practicing the City: Early Modern London on Stage* (2012), which links *1* and *2 Henry IV* to the developing credit economy of late sixteenth-century London and is reviewed here by Nicolas Tredell, attests. For sure, it is increasingly apparent that urban locations did matter to Shakespeare and even 'remote locations ... were readily understood to represent English society in general, and...specifically London' (Grantley 5).

However, it is also evident that attempts to connect Shakespeare's texts with their immediate context tend to rely on 'tentative conditional and subjunctive formulations' (McEleney 1198); this is definitely the case in regards to Catharine Arnold's aforementioned book which is reviewed here by Adele Lee. Further, for most critics concerned with the representation of London in early modern literature and drama, the bard is still not the most obvious or fruitful of sources. Instead, scholars continue to turn to Thomas Dekker, Ben Jonson and Thomas Middleton, that is, authors who more directly address the urban milieu, as well as chorographical descriptions, prose pamphlets, civic pageants and royal entries. The articles and reviews included in this special issue, then, imply that Shakespeare is a long way from becoming a central focal point for Literary Londoners. (Indeed, the same could be said about early modern literature in general). With the exception of John Keefe's essay, which makes the fascinating claim that spectators would have recognised their city in the very buildings where

Shakespeare's plays were first performed since theatres were constructed from material taken from the streets of London, all the essays here analyse the creative and critical works of *other* figures in the Literary London canon. Romola Nuttall, for instance, in an article that explores early modern debates about the status and function of the playhouses and their effect on citizen audiences, focuses on Philip Sidney's *Defence of Poesy* (c. 1579) and Thomas Heywood's *Apology for Actors* (c. 1608) and through comparing the two treatises traces a subtle change in attitude between the Elizabethan and the Jacobean period. Ananya Dutta Gupta, on the other hand, in 'Gender, Genre and the City', centres her attention on, and offers a timely re-reading of, Thomas Deloney's late-1580s' ballad about the Biblical Judith's daring assassination of her city's besieger, Holofernes. Arguing that Deloney challenges entrenched male prejudices about women's moral behaviour in the urban milieu, Gupta's essay concludes that the ballad 'ultimately serves to reinforce ... the prevalent cultural binary between the exceptional urban female saviour and the urban female traitor-destroyer, between a virtuous city woman and city women of vice'.

Only in Robert Stagg's short but provocative 'thought piece', which highlights the uncanny parallels between sixteenth-century up-and-coming Shoreditch and the current, controversial gentrification of East London, does Shakespeare take centre stage. Reflecting on a thirty-minute documentary titled 'Shoreditch: Shakespeare's Hidden London' that the author directed, Stagg also calls attention to how current accounts of Shakespeare's career are too 'Globe-centric' and often ignore the playwright's life in other parts of London. In particular, Stagg makes the salient point that recent 'news about Shoreditch's Elizabethan past has reoriented public perceptions of Shakespeare's career [and] where previously all eyes were focused on the Globe and South Bank, attention has now turned a little more to Shoreditch—helped by local innovations like RIFT's 'Shakespeare in Shoreditch' festival'. Traces of Shakespeare's Shoreditch—namely, The Theatre and The Curtain—are as difficult to find as traces of London in Shakespeare's plays, however, which would explain why all the essays included and most of the books reviewed in this issue, which include Anna Bayman's *Thomas Dekker and the Culture of Pamphleteering in Early Modern London* (2014), Kathleen Miller's *The Literary Culture of Plague in Early Modern England* (2017) and Gavin Hollis' *The Absence of America: The London Stage, 1576-1642*, are decidedly not 'Shakespeare-centric'. Indeed, perhaps urban fiction studies is one of only a few sub-disciplines within early modern literary studies that does not revolve around Shakespeare and thus offers us a more expansive, less parochial view of this time period.

### **To Cite this Article**

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