



**Catharine Arnold, *Globe: Life in Shakespeare's London*,
Simon & Schuster, 2015, paperback, 312 pages. ISBN:978-1-
4711-2570-6; £8.99.**

Reviewed by

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The Literary London Journal, Volume 14 Number 1 (Spring 2017)

Promising to 'take the reader on a virtual tour of [London] through Shakespeare's life and work' (2), Arnold's book makes a similar claim to Crawford, Dustagheer and Young's *Shakespeare and London* (2015) which is that the life of the Bard was 'inextricably linked' with that of his adopted city. Yet, although certainly succeeding in bringing Shakespeare's city—in all its gory and glorious detail—to life for the reader, Arnold does not fully succeed in providing proof of how exactly London, specifically that 'Bohemian enclave' in Shoreditch to which he belonged, 'provided Shakespeare with a rich seam of authentic lowlife which he mined for years to come' (96). While suggestions that the tragic fate of a Jewish doctor called Rodrigo Lopez inspired *The Merchant of Venice*, and the scene of a young girl out of her wits who had drowned in a ditch at Moorfields influenced the creation of Ophelia, are provocative and definitely not improbable, they are largely conjectural and often devoid of citation or factual content. Thus, Arnold's claims that London served as Shakespeare's main muse so much so that his drama is primarily shaped and colored by the sites, events and characters he encountered in the burgeoning metropolis are not only unsupported by concrete evidence, but contradicted through her own admission that Shakespeare 'rare[ly]' made 'topical reference to recent events' (186).

Similar to the well known journey undertaken by the American tourist James C. Fairfield and the British author Christian Teale in the early 1900s in search of Shakespeare's London which proved a disappointment, then, Arnold's book leaves the reader feeling unsatisfied at how little of London is actually evident in the Bard's corpus. In other words, just as references to Shakespeare in London are few—'none of the buildings associated with [him] ha[ve] actually survived' (258)—references to London in Shakespeare are rare and often oblique. That said, the author does a superb job (as she does in her four other popular 'London' books, including *City of Sin: London and its Vices* [2010]) at vividly conveying the (sometimes unsavoury) culture and customs of London in the olden days. In particular, she offers the reader interesting, 'insider's scoop' on the history and nature of playhouses, theatre-going and professional writing in the early modern period. Her focus, therefore, is mostly on the 'showbiz' world, the (seedy) entertainment district, and the relationships and rivalries between well-known dramatists such as Ben Jonson, Thomas Kyd and Christopher Marlowe, all of whom emerge as more intriguing figures than 'Will', whom Arnold portrays in the most bland and outdated fashion. He was 'handsome', sober, intelligent, law-abiding and armed with a formidable work ethic, she claims, thereby recycling traditional, sentimental and clichéd views that have long been challenged both from within and outside of academia. She even repeats the (problematic and oft-contested) mantra that Shakespeare was 'Not of an age, but for all time', which again undermines the book's central premise that the playwright is 'the authentic voice of [Renaissance] London' (6).

Replete with fascinating and highly amusing anecdotes, *Globe: Life in Shakespeare's London's* strong point is, as stated, the information it provides about how acting found its place in the city and Arnold excels at 'bringing to life the extraordinary story of the Globe playhouse in its three incarnations' (276): the final chapter titled 'The Globe Reborn', which features an interview with Dominic Dromgoole, is especially touching and illuminating. However, this is not a recommended text for anyone hoping to learn anything radically new about either Shakespeare, his works (which she analyzes in scant detail, offering mainly plot synopses and thin character sketches) or this seminal epoch. Indeed, Arnold does not challenge prevailing views of this chapter in history and might even be accused of occasionally airbrushing the so-called 'Golden Age'. Still, one cannot deny that this is an extremely entertaining work of popular history which is well researched, animatedly written and nicely illustrated. And, even if Shakespeare's drama suggests the playwright did not immerse himself in his immediate surroundings and directly address contemporary issues, Arnold's book certainly engages (lovingly) with, and brings to technicolor life, 'the flower of cities all'.

Note on Contributor

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To Cite this Article

Lee, Adele, 'Review of: Globe: Life in Shakespeare's London'. *The Literary London Journal*, Volume 14, Number 1 (Spring 2017): 62-64. Online at <http://www.literarylondon.org/london-journal/spring2017/lee.pdf>.