

Shakespeare's Alleged Drug Use

by David P. Gontar (December 2015)

When the media began recently to belch forth accounts of Shakespeare's use of drugs, many aging Hippies sat up and took notice. It seems that The Shakespeare Birthplace Trust decided to allow a collection of clay artifacts found in excavations at New Place, Stratford Village, to be handed over to Professor J.F. Thackeray and his team of palaeoanthropologists at the University of the Witwatersand in South Africa. These bits of pulverized brick-a-brac were subjected to the usual infallible tests and shown to contain microscopic traces of cannabis. Prof. Thackeray instantly careened into print to herald Shakespeare's introduction at Elizabeth's court to narcotics brought by English explorers of the New World. There followed a PR frenzy as reporters fell over one another in a rush to reveal that Shakespeare had initiated the practice of opiate-based literature hitherto traced back only as far as S.T. Coleridge and Thomas De Quincey. Of course the Shakespeare mystery was now laid bare: it was not Melpomene who had prompted the Bard's tragic reveries, it was Dope. The mere presence of such buried detritus was taken by the cognoscenti (wink, wink) as conclusive proof that immortal Shakespeare was – *Cur Deus Homo* – one of us! No thought was given to the possibility that such moldy substances might have once belonged to someone other than the author of the *Venus and Adonis*. Found in Shakespeare's backyard, they must have been his. *QED*.

Nothing of the sort was established. And though Prof. Thackeray and the obliging Birthplace Trust had not proven that the Poet/Dramatist achieved his reputation through the use of cannabis, the supposed news went viral. It was just the kind of gossip revelation so dear to the hearts of avid journalists desperate for a scoop.

Now, lest we too jump on the dubious bandwagon, here are a few dull facts. New Place, the situs in question, was built in 1483. In May of 1597 when "Shakespeare" acquired it, it was over a century old. The exhumed earthenware

fragments were presumed to be pieces of tobacco pipes. As the tests indicated these may have been four centuries old, they could have been possessed and used by any number of curious Stratfordites. There is no evidence that William of Stratford had any knowledge of what was to be retrieved at the site centuries later. A veritable cornucopia of background information is available in a paper by Kevin Colls and William Mitchell in *British Archaeology*, Issue 113, July/Aug 2010. There we also learn that Shakespeare lived only occasionally at New Place after its purchase in 1597. He preferred to lease it to various relatives, including his cousin, Thomas Greene, who resided there as late as 1609. Even if we take the preposterous leap of faith and accept poor William as the great Writer/Actor, to associate him with the strange vegetation rotting in Stratford's sacred soil requires an equally gratuitous inference. William resided in New Place in his dotage until 1616. It was razed to the ground in 1759. The current edifice is, as you might expect, a lovely reconstruction assembled by the Birthplace Trust. Stratford Village is today filled with the same sort of amusement park props which took in the super-gullible Washington Irving when he wandered there in 1815. (See, *Hamlet Made Simple and Other Essays*, p. 18.) Yet the tone of the Birthplace Trust remains as lofty as the call of a carnival barker.

Visit New Place, the site of Shakespeare's last home where he died in 1616

The Shakespeare Birthplace Trust is transforming New Place, the site of Shakespeare's home for the last years of his life, to create a major new heritage landmark where visitors can discover the story of the world famous playwright at the height of his success as a family man, writer and prominent citizen of Stratford-upon-Avon. This unique site will be the jewel in the crown of our national literary and cultural heritage, at the heart of the worldwide celebration of 400 years of Shakespeare's legacy in 2016.

The re-imagined Shakespeare's New Place is scheduled to open on 23 April 2016, the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's death.

"Re-imagined" is right. Though the press releases of the august Shakespeare Birthplace Trust make no mention of "the Bard's" alleged use of narcotics, given the public relations blitz of 2015 we can be sure that among the millions of Stratford gawkers next year will be a few Yankee septuagenarians in sandals and

tie-dyed T-shirts puffing on joints as they bask in the edifying glow of history.

David P. Gontar's latest book is [*Hamlet Made Simple and Other Essays*](#), New English Review Press, 2013.

To comment on this essay, please click [here](#).

To help New English Review continue to publish thought provoking essays such as this one, please click [here](#).

If you have enjoyed this essay by David P. Gontar and would like to read more of his work, please click [here](#).