

Shakespeare and George Puttenham's Arte of English Poesie

by Charles M. Willis

Charles Willis describes his forthcoming study which includes many, previously unpublished, archive documents

Shakespeare and George Puttenham's *Arte of English Poesie* explores the mysterious life of George Puttenham (1529 – 91), one of the most enigmatic characters of Queen Elizabeth I's reign. He was reputed to have authored the acclaimed anonymously written *Arte of English Poesie* in 1589, a book closely related to the Shakespeare plays. Included in this study are: Puttenham's Partheniades poems; his Justification document for the execution of Mary, Queen of Scots (1587); the attributed English Courtier and the Country Gentleman (Civil and Uncivil Life); a thirty page transcription from a manuscript which appears to be a translation from a 16th century unidentified story, which has similarities in plot with Shakespeare's *Winter's Tale*; three separate book lists listing nearly 250 books or authors mentioned; and other fascinating documents found in Puttenham's family archives, never before published.

All this historical information indicates Puttenham's importance as a writer and confirms his authorship of the *Arte of English Poesie*, which has been described as 'not only the most ambitious and comprehensive undertaking in Elizabethan criticism; it is also the expression of one of the most alert and flexible minds.'

In 1591 Puttenham was described by Elizabeth's godson, Sir John Harington, as 'ignoto', 'that unknown godfather', and a 'subtle lawyer', and his disastrous marriage to the wealthy widow Lady Elizabeth Windsor in 1560, effectively ruined his life, and the scandal of their divorce in 1575, followed by his bankruptcy and imprisonment between 1578-9, ensured that his reputation never recovered. However recently found family archive documents deposited in the Hampshire Record Office indicate his long and close association with Queen Elizabeth and Sir Francis Walsingham and the likelihood of his secret role as a writer of Protestant propaganda between 1578 – 91.

Throughout his life Puttenham had to conceal his name as a writer because his Catholic family was involved in the bitter religious conflict with Protestant and Puritan church leaders, which reached a climax in 1584 when his Catholic nephew

Francis Throckmorton was executed for treason.

Echoes of Puttenham in Shakespeare

The *Arte of English Poesie* (1589) has been described as one of the most important and celebrated works of literary criticism of Elizabeth's reign, but very little was known about the supposed author George Puttenham. In 1909 W.L. Rushton in *Shakespeare and the Arte of English Poesie* drew attention to more than two hundred literary references in *The Arte* which were repeated in the Shakespeare plays.

Puttenham's other literary work, the Partheniades poems (1580-1), as well as the Justification document for the execution of Mary Queen of Scots (1587), the *Civil and Uncivil Life* (1579), and his letters and legal documents, also show close parallels with the language of Shakespeare's poems and plays. Thus Puttenham may well have been involved in the composition and writing of various anonymous plays and poems that were circulating between 1576-91, which may have been early versions of Shakespeare's work.

Why Puttenham's name as a writer has been concealed

The burial of a 'George Putnam, Gent.' is listed in the parish register of St Brides, London on January 6th 1591, which is thought to be George Puttenham. However there was no probate granted, and no references to his death during the 1590's, which would indicate that either very few people knew he had died, or he was secretly murdered, and his death was kept secret. But in 1594, it would have been less of a secret, as his former housekeeper or servant Mary Simmes made a claim for his estate, based on an alleged spoken will of Puttenham's dating from August 1589.

Her claim was rejected and she withdrew her application and after July 1595 no probate was granted, which meant that Puttenham was not proved dead, and no one in his family came forward to claim his estate. He may have died in debt and the family did not want to claim his estate, or he was still alive, and his servant Mary Simmes had forged the spoken will of 1589, because he owed her money. Mary Simmes' copy of his supposed spoken will is highly

suspicious as the historical records indicate that Puttenham already had an heir, his daughter Ann, who had married Andrew Windsor. In 1610 when Mary Simmes made another claim on Puttenham's estate which was rejected, she was described as: 'a concubine as many others were to him, to his utter overthrow and his lady's (Windsor) undoing'

There are very few records of Puttenham's activities between his divorce in 1575 until 1591, which would indicate that he intentionally wished to conceal his activities as author of the *Arte of English Poesie*, the *Partheniades* poems, the *Justification* document and his other work because he feared for his life (which he conveys in a letter to his brother-in-law Sir John Throckmorton in 1578), and also because he did not want to cause trouble for his family, who might have been punished because of the family association. Between 1560-90 Puttenham had aroused the hostility of four different groups of powerful and influential people.

Firstly his wife Lady Windsor's family, the Paulets, and their cousins the family of the first Marquis of Winchester. The Paulets never forgave Puttenham who they believed had illegally taken their due inheritance, when he married the widow of Richard Paulet, younger brother of Elizabeth's Lord Treasurer, William, the first Marquis of Winchester. In ca.1590 William Paulet, fourth Marquis of Winchester (ca. 1565-1629), married Lucy Cecil, grand-daughter of Lord Burghley's eldest son Thomas Cecil, first Earl of Exeter. In a letter written in 1602, Anne Paulet who was the wife of Puttenham's step-grandson Sir Richard Paulet, writes to a relative referring to a hawking invitation from Robert Cecil, and complains that her family still had financial problems Puttenham had tied up in legal bonds her husband's grandmother Lady Windsor, who died in 1581, for which they were still liable.

Because of Puttenham's reputation as an enemy of the Puritans, both the Paulet and Cecil families for political reasons, would have wanted to ignore any connection they had with Puttenham, and try and conceal his authorship of the *Arte of English Poesie* and any other works by him.

Secondly, Puttenham had not been forgiven by the Catholic side of the Throckmorton family, who held Puttenham partly responsible for the disgrace and early death of Sir John Throckmorton in 1580, who had married Puttenham's sister Margaret. Sir John's premature death in 1580 precipitated his two sons Francis and Thomas, into joining a Catholic conspiracy between 1580-3. Francis was executed for treason in July 1584; Thomas exiled for life.

Thirdly, when Puttenham wrote Elizabeth's *Justification* document for the execution of Mary, Queen of Scots in 1587, he aroused the indignation and anger of English Catholics who had supported Mary. Puttenham's cousins Lord Windsor's family were also faithful Catholics, and Edmund Windsor who was closely related to Lord Frederick Windsor who died in 1585, was imprisoned after being implicated in the Babington plot of 1586.

Lastly, Puttenham had been one of the most active and effective, (because of his legal skills and court connections), opponents of the Puritan church leaders between 1570-90.

Therefore between 1575 until his supposed death in 1591, Puttenham's life was continually in danger from hired killers. In October 1578 when he was refusing to appear in court to answer his ex-wife's demands for money, he wrote to his brother-in-law Sir John Throckmorton saying that:

I am assaulted and laid wait for, in every corner and bush by the highways, and now this is the fourth of fifth time I have been put in danger to be murdered, twice by the Lord Paulet and his servants, and my goods taken away from me, twice of thrice other times by Mrs Paulet's servants who one time out of all the rest, stalked out of a thicket by the highway's side, and assaulted me with swords drawn and had chased my head to the gallows, if by good providence, one of them had not fallen from his horse and landed at my heels and could not perform his bloody (task).

In November he wrote to the Star Chamber court saying:

It hath been seen by experience that wilful murder hath been committed by pretext of such warrant served by men's mortal enemies, who have sought apt occasions to offer them violence.

In 1578 Puttenham wrote to his brother-in-law Sir John Throckmorton saying that there had been numerous attempts to kill him by members of his wife's family, the Paulets, who later married into the Cecils. Puttenham would also have aroused the animosity of King James I, for his critical views concerning his mother Mary, Queen of Scots, which Puttenham expressed in Queen Elizabeth's *Justification* document for her execution in 1587. Other writers associated with Elizabeth's court circle, like Sir Walter Raleigh and the Earl of Oxford, could never reveal their names as this would draw attention

to their association with Elizabeth and arouse criticism from the Puritan church leaders

Puttenham and the Earl of Oxford

Puttenham was also closely related to Edward de Vere, the Earl of Oxford, through his second cousin Lord Edward Windsor who was married to Katherine de Vere, the Earl of Oxford's half-sister. Lord Edward Windsor was also the step-son of Puttenham's wife Lady Windsor.

Of nearly twenty contemporary poets mentioned in Puttenham's *Arte of English Poesie* (1589), only four (Oxford, Sidney, Raleigh and Dyer) appear three times. The references to Oxford are as follows:

in her Majesty's time that now is, are sprung up another crew of Courtly makers (ie. poets), noblemen and gentlemen of her Majesty's own servants, who have written excellently well, as it would appear if their doings could be found out and made public, with the rest, of which number is first that noble gentleman, Edward, Earl of Oxford . . .

doings as I have seen of theirs . . . for tragedy, the Lord Buckhurst . . . to deserve the highest praise, the Earl of Oxford . . . for comedy and interlude

Edward, Earl of Oxford, a most noble and learned gentleman, made in this figure of response an emblem of desire . . . which for his excellency and wit I set down some part of the verses, for example . . .

This praise would indicate that Puttenham knew Oxford's literary work and had the highest regard for it. This regard is significant as Puttenham was known to have been one of the most severe literary critics of Elizabeth's reign.

Puttenham and Oxford were both closely involved with the development of English literature for 25 years between 1565-90, and both were branded as enemies of the church and adulterers. It is perhaps for these reasons that their names have been intentionally overlooked in connection with Shakespeare.