



UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

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Twin Cities Campus

*Department of English
College of Liberal Arts*

*310 Pillsbury Drive SE
Minneapolis, MN 55455*

Phone: 612-625-3363

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Dear Janine Lee,

I am writing to express my firm support for the Bearley/Wilmcote Action Group and my strenuous opposition to the proposed SWLP BW development. The plan to introduce 10,000 houses and industrial infrastructure between Stratford-upon-Avon and Wilmcote is not merely a local planning concern; it is a threat to a global cultural asset.

As the author of *Imagining Shakespeare's Wife: The Afterlife of Anne Hathaway* and a Professor at the University of Minnesota, I witness firsthand the international value of this landscape. Each year, I lead American students on a "Shakespeare in London and Stratford" course. While we visit important sites like the British Museum, St. Paul's Cathedral, the Globe Theatre, and Westminster Abbey, hands down the most transformative experience for my students is the walk from Stratford to Shottery and to the Wilmcote area, where they can commune with the unspoiled natural world as Shakespeare himself would have experienced it. There is no place like this in the world, where the landscape and some of the most famous poetry ever written, can still be experienced today. My students don't find Shakespeare in the bustle of London; they find him in the quiet walk into the countryside outside of Stratford, where they discover a landscape that has captured the global imagination for centuries. My students return to America each year with a deep understanding of the character of the British landscape that surrounded Shakespeare's family life, and a new appreciation for the value of preserving these historic spaces for posterity. Throughout history, other visitors from around the world have sought the unique peace and connection with literary history that the Shakespearean countryside offers. One educator from Lansing, Michigan noted in 1918 that she came to Stratford "to find Shakespeare," and instead when she ventured out into the countryside, she discovered "the soul of England . . . what Shakespeare found and loved, the undying essence of English life and art." My own American students are not the first, and hopefully will not be the last to find the "soul of England" in the unspoiled countryside surrounding the world that Shakespeare knew.

Although the pastoral English countryside that nurtured Shakespeare's creativity, where his wife grew up, and where his mother's family resided in Wilmcote, has captured the imagination of people around the world, this area has been under threat before. In 1840, visitor William Howitt was captivated by "the quiet happiness" of the country where Shakespeare gleaned inspiration. When he visited the countryside surrounding Stratford, Howitt exclaimed, "Perhaps at the very moment I write these remarks this interesting dwelling may be destroyed, and all that I have been describing have given way to the ravages of modern change." Howitt's fears never came to pass,

thankfully, and the “ravages of modern change” spared this historic space. In 1854, American author Harriet Beecher Stowe expressed a similar fear that this meaningful countryside which allows visitors to glimpse a part of Shakespeare’s life story, “stands a little aloof from the bustle of modern progress” but is “destined soon to pass away, under the restless regenerating force of modern progress.” Stowe’s fears were also for nought, and the “restless regenerating force of modern progress” again spared this treasured space.

Building a modern settlement of the proposed scale here would permanently destroy the connection with this unique historic past. The current development proposal is as ill-conceived as American P.T. Barnum’s 1847 scheme to dismantle Shakespeare’s Birthplace and transport it across the Atlantic as a money-making theme park attraction. Just as a committee of concerned citizens banded together to save the nation’s heritage on Henley Street from commercial exploitation, we must continue to protect this landscape from short-sighted housing targets.

Finally, I should highlight the specific threat to the area surrounding Mary Arden’s Farm in Wilmcote. As a landmark dedicated to the women of the Shakespeare family, its integrity is essential to the study of the historical women in Shakespeare’s family. Encroaching development, including increased traffic, paved trails, and flood risks, would compromise the “undying essence” of the rural life that Maggie O’Farrell’s *Hamnet* has recently brought to the forefront of global consciousness. If we allow urban sprawl to swallow Mary Arden’s Farm and the surrounding fields, we lose the ability to imagine the lives of the women who shaped one of the world’s greatest poets. Once this rural character is sacrificed, it is gone forever. Surely there are alternatives that do not involve the irreversible decimation of this crucial piece of history.

Sincerely,

Katherine Scheil

Katherine Scheil
Associate Dean of Academic Affairs and Undergraduate Education
Professor of English