

The answers may be correct but the questions are wrong

Kevin Gilvary reviews: *'In Search of Shakespeare' by Michael Wood*
London, BBC (2003) 352 pp £20

'Shakespeare', has been voted Man of the Millennium, the greatest literary genius known to the world; yet what is known of the life of Shaksper (usual spelling) is strangely divorced from the works which bear the name Shake-speare (often hyphenated). Shaksper was born in Stratford-upon-Avon in 1564 and died there in 1616. There are about 80 documents relating to his life, which show his involvement in various business transactions, including a share in the Globe. The records, however, offer no insight into the mind of the author who wrote the plays.

Michael Wood however has produced a four part TV documentary and a BBC book that claims to be 'full of fresh insights and fascinating new discoveries.' Well it would do, wouldn't it? Michael Wood has made quite a name for himself as a thoughtful investigator of historical issues. Who can forget his early *In Search of the Trojan War* or his more recent *In the Footsteps of Alexander*? Both series demonstrate his desire to consult original documents, question basic assumptions and interview a variety of experts. Sadly in this latest offering he does none of these. The tie-in book contains many lavish illustrations, more than in any similar publication; the map of the Shoreditch theatre district (119) is particularly useful. Therein lies the only value: a wealth of circumstantial evidence which does little to say anything new about the person who wrote the works.

Doubts about Shakespeare as the Bard

This yawning gulf between the person and the works has led many to question whether Shaksper of Stratford was in fact the real author. Many actors, including Sir Derek Jacobi (president of the De Vere Society), Leslie Howard, Charlie Chaplin, Orson Welles, Michael York and John Gielgud, have doubted the traditional biography of the Bard. Many writers, including Mark Twain, Henry James and Daphne du Maurier have entertained similar doubts. Many other intellectuals, including Sigmund Freud and J E Powell, and many politicians, including Bismarck, Disraeli, Palmerston and De Gaulle have found it impossible to accept this myth. After noting his genius, his unparalleled learning and his aristocratic outlook, they have decided that the Bard cannot have been William of Stratford.

There are six crucial questions about the authorship which need constantly to be borne in mind. These questions about the authorship that have perplexed scholars for years. Without adequate answers, speculation about the Dark Lady or the second best bet is a meaningless irrelevance. The major disappointment for those of us interested in the Authorship Question is that the book completely ignores it. Wood simply recounts the standard 'orthodox' biography of William of Stratford as if nobody has ever had doubts. This stands in contrast to many recent biographers eg Stanley Wells Shakespeare for all time (2002: 387-8), who at least mentions that there is a controversy even though he rejects it.

What are these central issues and how does Michael Wood address them?

1 How could a provincial actor from Stratford gain such an intimate knowledge of court life (and medicine, botany, the law, the sea and aristocratic pursuits such as hunting and falconry)?

The author was undoubtedly a genius, but genius alone could not have provided the him with detailed inside knowledge and understanding of court life. The author needed to be present and observe for himself. From the extensive court records of the period, it is clear that Shaksper of Stratford received small payments for court performances as an actor, but was never formally presented at court to Elizabeth or James I and was never paid any money as a playwright. He was not known to the major government ministers (Cecil and Walsingham) as he is not mentioned in their extensive papers.

His knowledge of the law 'might have come from living with a litigious father.' (70)

2 How could he know so much of classical authors?

Shaksper probably attended the local grammar school (the relevant records do not survive) but he did not attend either of the universities of Oxford or Cambridge (where the records are complete) of the Inns of Court. Both *A Comedy of Errors* and *Twelfth Night* were performed at one of the Inns. When and where did he develop a mastery of Latin (or even

Italian and French)? Genius alone could not have gained a deep understanding of classical literature; the bard must have read the works thoroughly for himself. Whose libraries did he use?

Wood blithely assumes that he was educated at Stratford Grammar School: 'One day in class, when Shakespeare was about nine, his schoolmaster Simon Hunt introduced him in Latin to the Roman poet Ovid.' (61) This is plausible, but he should at least mention that the relevant records have not survived.

Bullough's eight volume *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare* should indicate that Shakespeare was exceptionally well-read, but Wood minimises this reading and suggests that he borrowed his books from Jonson: 'The fact that he was working [on *Julius Caesar* in 1599] with Jonson suggests that he might have borrowed a copy [of Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis*] from him.' (222) Euripides is not mentioned as a source by Bullough or Muir, while Daniell in *Arden*³ has only the briefest mention (95) as a possible original for the quarrel scene. There are, however, plenty of other classical authors used: Plutarch, Sallust, Tacitus, Suetonius and Appian (at least some in the original). There are also more modern works: Florus, Elyot's *Mirror for Magistrates*, *Il Cesare* (available only in Italian), *Caesar Interfectus* a Latin version recited at Christ College, Oxford. Did he borrow all these from Jonson? If so, perhaps he never returned them as Jonson seems not to have known about them.

In fact we only know of a connection between Shakespeare and Jonson because Shakespeare was cited as one of the principal comedians in *Every Man in his Humour* in 1598. There is no evidence that Shakespeare was writing with Jonson in the following year (or indeed in any year), nor is he mentioned in the cast list of *Every Man Out of his Humour* (1599).

3 Why did he leave no literary impression on anyone? How could he compose compromising love poetry to his social superior, the powerful Earl of Southampton and publish it in 1609?

Shaksper as a person seems to have left no literary impression on anyone. Jonson does not recognise him as a writer until the enigmatic dedication in the first Folio (1623). He is not known to have been patronised by any person of rank. Why did he not dedicate any of the 18 plays published in quarto in his lifetime to any one. Why were the early quartos (before 1598) were

published anonymously.

Wood makes very sweeping assumptions: 'Let us suppose that some time in the winter of 1588-9, Shakespeare joins a company based in London. Three or four years later he emerges as a playwright with several hits to his name.' (132) This should be seen as a problem: he is NOT mentioned by name, only partly named by Greene in *Groatsworth* as an 'upstart crow, beautified with our feathers' as the only Shake-scene etc. Greene suggests that he was NOT a playwright but a plagiarist. The name Shake-speare is not attached to any play before the second quartos of *Richard II* and *Richard III* in 1598.

Shakespeare may have done his writing in bars: 'the Mitre, say, in Bread Street, or perhaps at a favourite small local tavern.' (61) Wood claims that 'he had the patronage of noblemen,' (165) but doesn't name them.

Shakespeare's two narrative poems were dedicated to Southampton in his youth, while the young earl was a royal ward at Cecil House, under the care of Lord Burghley. Shaksper certainly did not live in Southampton's household at the time There is no mention in the Wriothesley papers of William of Stratford or any great tendency to patronise poets

Some sonnets (eg No 20) display a homoerotic tendency. Yet, if the sonnets were intended for the Earl of Southampton, as most scholars suggest, how could a commoner dare publish them in 1609 when both were alive? Homosexuality was a serious offence. The author would have needed powerful friends to defend him from the now married Earl of Southampton.

'The Earl of Southampton was literary, beautiful, bisexual . . .' (147) but fails to explore the implications of dedicating erotica to an under-age earl. He asserts that Shakespeare was responsible for the 'selection, punctuation, italicization and crucially the order' of the sonnets (304). His decision to publish was 'not just to make a little money on the side' when the theatres were closed, but also at the urging of his 'friends [presumably Thomas Heywood, Jonson and Drummond] with true literary judgement.' He recognises that 'the problem was of course the content' but does not even mention the Earl of Southampton at this point (or any time after his release from the Tower in 1604).

Wood identifies the Dark Lady of the sonnets as Elizabeth Lanier. This idea, which goes back to A L Rowse, has been rejected by Wells (no identification possible), Katherine Duncan-Jones (*Arden*³ 50-55, the Bard was homosexual), and by Jonathan Bate (*Genius of Shakespeare* prefers the wife of John Florio). They can't all be right! But

Michael Wood ignores the other candidates and confidently asserts his own.

4 How could he know so much of Italy and Italian literature?

Genius alone cannot account for the authentic setting of so many plays in Italy. It is widely agreed that sophisticated Italian-style comedies (later associated with the name of Shake-spear) were being performed in London by 1590. Where did he gain this literary and theatrical knowledge. Shaksper is not known to have been abroad and the last tour by Italian players was 1579.

Shakespeare, Wood tells us, 'gained his knowledge of Italy from Lewis Lewkenor's book on Venice in manuscript' and also from Elizabeth Lanier (née Bassano), the daughter of a Venetian Jew (195).

5 How could he leave not a single book or manuscript in his will?

In his will, Shaksper left detailed instructions for the disposal of many assets, including beds, sword and goblets, but he mentioned no manuscripts, no books owned or borrowed, no rights to published plays or poems, such as the sonnets. He did not even bequeath a copy of the Bible to his family

Wood spends many pages on Shakespeare's will – but only to answer the age-old conundrum of the 'second best bed' which triumphantly he explains as a family heirloom. He accepts that Shakespeare had been 'shockingly negligent about the preservation and publication of his scripts.' (341) More significant questions are overlooked. Why no mention of 17 plays still in manuscript? Why no mention of books owned, borrowed or published? Why no mention of the Geneva Bible? Why no mention of Ovid's Metamorphosis which 'may have been' given to him as a boy by his mother. (48)

6 Why was there no notice of such a writer's death in 1616?

Geniuses such as Mozart or Michelangelo arouse great feelings during their lives and at their deaths. The man from Stratford aroused none. An inferior playwright, Francis Beaumont, who also died in 1616, was buried at Westminster Abbey, but no great public honour was accorded William of Stratford until 1740.

Wood ignores this question entirely.

A second disappointment is the complete lack of references. For an author who claims 'fresh insights and fascinating new discoveries', it seems strange that we are unable to check which of his many assertions are indeed fresh or discoveries. A TV

documentary and its accompanying book are attempting to popularise a difficult subject, so it is unlikely to slow down a narrative by footnotes, but at least some notes at the end would be useful. Wells includes 17 pages of notes on 400 pages of text.

Nor does Wood simplify his subject: 'Out of the latter tale, Shakespeare constructed a brilliant, hard-edged political thriller, again leaving aside the multi-layered Christian preoccupations of his tragedy for a classical narrative of personal political destiny, laced with a strong dose of homo-erotic bonding.' (297) (Apparently, he is talking about Coriolanus.)

Investigative presenters often use questions to set agendas. Michael, however, uses questions to proffer answers in a way that makes him sound dramatic but banal: 'And what of his writing habits and discipline? With morning rehearsals and afternoon shows, when did he write? At night? Or did he get up at six and do three hours before breakfast? This again we shall never know.' (267)

Jonathan Bate once remarked that any biography of Shakespeare reveals more about the writer than the subject. Did Michael Wood write this book in a pub? Did he record his brain-storming sessions with the crew? Is he only interested in sounding dramatic? Will the Royal Historical Society revoke his membership? We will never know, but will we ever care?

Shake-Speare was almost certainly a pseudonym for the real writer of genius. Michael Wood should look for him elsewhere in the Elizabethan world.