

## DEAD SHEPHERD

Initially, I was most drawn to the theory that Christopher Marlowe wrote the works of Shakespeare - having faked his death in Deptford and fled into exile abroad to avoid almost certain torture by the Court of the Star Chamber. I first became gripped by the possibility because of a wonderful old lady (sadly no longer with us) called Dolly Wraight (who wrote under the pen name D W Wraight).

She'd been the final speaker at the first Shakespeare Authorship Trust conference I attended, and proceeded to eclipse those who'd gone before her. With a quavery voice and modest manner, reading from a small reporter's notebook, there was little to suggest that what was to follow was incendiary testimony, backed up by the most extensive and credible research of the day.

I'd begun to feel rather weary until her slot, especially after one particularly fanciful lecture, purporting the sonnets were written by a woman; by an American academic who had little to back up her hypothesis except 'overwhelming gut feelings'. The spotlight also provided an opportunity for said academic to overshare details of their seemingly moribund romantic life and acrimonious divorce. Factors which, it appeared, formed the basis of her reading of the sonnets. I'm all for personal interpretations and connections (hence this blog), but can't imagine such diversions add credibility to an already stigmatised debate when presented by academics as legitimate research.

Perhaps that's a bit harsh though, as Ms Wraight herself wasn't averse to a few confirmation biases and hypothetical detours of her own. She appeared somewhat unconvinced about the suggestions that Marlowe might have been gay or bisexual for instance; to some degree eager to sanitise his bad-boy image and dwindle it down (or romance it up) to a mere rogueish charm. It seems to me though that if Marlowe wasn't sexually interested in men (at least partially) he'd a funny way of showing it. Should *Edward the Second* (gay royal biopic), *Hero and Leander* (gay erotic poetry), and the prologue to *Dido Queen of Carthage* (featuring Jove and his mortal rent-boy Ganymede in a scene that wouldn't be out of place in gay soft porn) not be influenced by the writer's own particular proclivities, it's hard to imagine why he'd write such things.

There is also this one bizarre and astonishing fact. The careers of Shakespeare and Marlowe, both believed to be born in the same year (perhaps even on the same day) all too conveniently dovetail. As Marlowe (the most celebrated poet and playwright of the age) supposedly dies, Shake-Speare springs (totally unheralded) into the fray with *Venus and Adonis*. This particularly courtly, intellectually flashy and racy (in its *confessions of a cougar* way) bestseller is also dedicated to our old friend Henry Wriothesley.

Imagine, friends, you are a young poet, with no credentials or standing in society, and you choose to approach a famously arrogant and vain member of the aristocracy with a poem that shows him being essentially sexually assaulted by a woman old enough to be his mother as well as an utterly presumptuous personal familiarity. And as implausible (and utterly without proof) that theory is, there are also clear connections to other contenders (as we have seen in the case of Edward de Vere). In terms of theme and style, the poem is clearly in the domain of Marlowe, stylometrically and thematically sitting alongside his *Hero and Leander*, to name just one.

Despite DW Wraight's desire to keep Marlowe in the closet however, her tireless investigative research kept the torch burning for him and inspired others (as others before

her) to undertake all manner of uncharted territory and research (some of which even ended up disproving her own). The trail that leads from Deptford strand to Europe (France, the Netherlands and Italy) where Marlowe had supposedly fled may not have turned up absolute proof as yet, but it's nonetheless a fitting and deeply intriguing narrative that mirrors the almost obsessive focus on themes of exile, reconciliation and forgiveness - of coincidences and magical, miraculous restorations, resurrections, interventions and re-acquaintances - of the late plays. In addition, the preponderance of sonnets (over half) that seem to deal with painful ideas like exile, banishment, scandal and absence from those beloved by the poet seem tantalisingly and appropriately justified.