

In Shakespeare's shadow

THE RECENT opening of the Swan Theatre at Stratford, which is dedicated to the production of plays by Shakespeare's contemporaries, is the most visible expression of the current interest in the works of the Bard's friends and rivals.

In *At The Sign Of The Swan* (Harper; £9.95). Judith Cook is also interested in the teeming theatrical life of Elizabeth's England, and in this book she concentrates on two aspects of Shakespeare's world — the lives and the plays of the many lesser known dramatists of the time.

Cook describes a London filled with licentiousness and skulduggery at the centre of which seemed to have been every wordsmith who ever turned his quill to dramaturgy.

We encounter names which are no longer familiar to our stages, but which represented the hit dramatists

of the period — Middleton, Marlowe, Dekker, Marston, Tourneur, Beaumont, Fletcher, Ford and Massinger. Most of whom seemed to have come to an ignominious end.

Interesting how the deaths of all these talented dramatists are recorded, but so little else is known about them, their fame becoming them most in their death.

As important to Judith Cook, as the lives of the dramatists are their plays. She promises the reader that she will discuss these now little known plays not as texts but as theatre. Unfortunately, the discussion tends to be little more than descriptions of the plots and characters.

In the end there is a feeling of puzzlement. For whom is the book intended? On the one hand, it does not have the apparatus and authority of an academic treatise. On the other

hand, Cook fails to flesh out the scant details of the many potentially interesting lives either with the liveliness or insight which might appeal to the general reader.

Too much time is spent complaining that too little is known and that there is not room in the book to go into further details.

At The Sign Of The Swan is an important survey of works that deserve to be revived and a handy little reference work for looking up who wrote *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*, or such unmemorable lines as "For wit is like a rest/Held up at tennis, which men do the best/With the best gamesters."

Wit, though, is one of the things this book lacks.

Ifan Payne

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