

## Preface

The two terms of this book's title - 'culture' and 'myth'- map the territory of its contents, which span more or less a decade of work (1984-94) in a particular area of Shakespeare studies. The sub-title derives from a collection of essays by various hands, published in 1988 as *The Shakespeare Myth*. The term 'myth' was derived from Roland Barthes' *Mythologies*<sup>i</sup> was an attempt to identify a powerful cultural institution, constructed around the figure of Shakespeare, that could be analysed to some degree separately from the person of the Elizabethan dramatist, and the texts of his works.

Traditional Shakespeare criticism, as it is still very widely practised, consists of reading and interpreting the plays and poems; seeking to unlock their intrinsic meanings by reference to the author's assumed 'intentions' or to the historical context in which he wrote; analysing the plays in relation to their origins in the Elizabethan theatre and so on. *The Shakespeare Myth* sought a different approach:

It is incumbent (I said in the Preface) upon a new critical intervention into the Shakespeare debate to . . . break from the conventions of textual re-reading, and to address directly those fields of discourse and those institutional practices in which the cultural phenomenon of Shakespeare operates with some form of signifying power. The contributors to this volume were encouraged to look behind and beyond the 'plays' as commonly constituted and presented, the narrowly defined forms of literary text, historical phenomenon and theatrical production, and to recognise 'Shakespeare' wherever and whenever that authorial construction is manifested, in forms as diverse as television advertisements, comedy sketches, Stratford-upon-Avon tourist attractions, the design on a twenty pound note or a narcissistic portrait in a homoerotic 'physique' magazine<sup>ii</sup>.

Or as Terry Eagleton put it in his 'Afterword', the book was a study of 'Shakespeare', rather than of Shakespeare (p. 204), a name which, Eagleton went on to suggest, 'is merely metonymic of an entire cultural-political formation, and thus more akin to "Disney" or "Rockefeller" than to "Jane Smith"' (204).

'Shakespeare' was seen throughout *The Shakespeare Myth* as a site of cultural production, a ground for the making of social meaning or as an ideological apparatus at work in contemporary culture. The focus of the study was therefore not, as in more traditional criticism, on the great dramatist who formulated, in memorable works, eternal truths; but rather on the various ways in which 'Shakespeare' has been made to mean different things in different historical and cultural contexts. The method of the book was thus more a kind of sociology or politics of cultural history than anything that could be recognised as literary criticism<sup>iii</sup>. We were looking at the plays not as artifacts or as writings produced within a particular historical formation but at the uses to which they have been put within the framework of the 'Shakespeare' institution. Hence the book was structured into two parts. The first dealt with 'Discursive Formations' and examined the Shakespeare myth at work in such general social experiences as the tourist industry of Stratford-upon-Avon (reflected here in the essay on "Bardolatry"), the political conflicts surrounding the Globe reconstruction project and how Shakespeare's presence is felt in popular culture and in contemporary sexual politics. The second was addressed to the 'Cultural Practices' of reproducing Shakespeare in theatre, education and television.

The title obviously caught on. James Wood in *The Guardian* referred to 'a Shakespeare Myth school of criticism' (2 April 1992, p. 26). At least one book, *Appropriating Shakespeare*, picked up the phrase in its sub-title: '*the works and the myth*'<sup>iv</sup>. More surprisingly, considering the vast growth in this kind of criticism since the book's publication, it still seems to serve as a useful catch phrase. On the World Wide Web can be found the syllabus of a course, taught at Wesleyan University in America, entitled 'The Shakespeare Myth' which is described as focusing on:

Shakespeare as a site of cultural production, as one of the places where our society's understanding of itself is worked out.

The course examines how the Shakespeare corpus is continually reproduced in edited texts and theatrical adaptations; how Shakespeare's reputation as 'genius' and 'national poet' developed in the course of the eighteenth century; how Shakespeare functions, as I drama and literature, in different cultural situations, including those of America and Britain and how the plays are reproduced in (often

radically innovative) modern film versions. Barbara Hodgdon sums up this general acceptance of the term in her 1998 book *The Shakespeare Trade*:

The ideological contours of the historically determined 'Shakespeare Myth' and how it functions to sustain cultural consensus has by now become a commonplace of cultural criticism<sup>v</sup>.

Here the fact that the term 'cultural criticism' can be regarded as so commonplace that it contains its own commonplaces, is an indication of the deep and large-scale changes that have taken place in the discipline of literary criticism since the early 1970s. Then, the impact of intellectual movements such as post-structuralism, marxism, feminism and post-colonialism were beginning to filter into the academy and to generate a recognisably 'radical' criticism. Such criticism has now become mainstream and although it has lost much of the political urgency it possessed in those days when literary criticism could be seen as part of a socialist critique of contemporary capitalist ideology and society, it has certainly changed the relations between theory and practice in what people actually do when they study 'English':

In *The Shakespeare Myth* this political complexion of post-1970 'cultural studies' was made very overt. The book appeared under the general editorship of Alan Sinfield and Jonathan Dollimore, in a series called *Cultural Politics* which explicitly espoused 'cultural materialism' (a development of marxist philosophy) and insisted on its political commitment:

Cultural materialism does not pretend to political neutrality. It does not, like much established literary criticism, attempt to mystify its perspectives as the natural or obvious interpretation of an allegedly given textual fact. On the contrary, it registers its commitment to the transformation of a social order that exploits people on grounds of race, gender, sexuality and class.

Accordingly *The Shakespeare Myth* was widely received as a political statement, and its impact often described in metaphors of military violence, as in this review<sup>vi</sup>:

Graham Holderness's collection of essays, bent on exposing the ideological context of 'bardolatry' - both inside and outside of academe - is a well-directed, well-meant volley in the Political Shakespeare<sup>vii</sup> war declared by Terence Hawkes, Terry Eagleton, *et alii*.

And another reviewer in Shakespeare Survey described the book as manifesting<sup>viii</sup>

The embattled and sometimes embittered air of a document from the front line in a war against Thatcher's Britain.

*The Shakespeare Myth* was indeed polemical, though not quite as parochial as this hostile reviewer implied. Certainly much of my work in the field of 'cultural materialism' derived from studies in marxist philosophy and politics, and owed something to the nature of political engagement as it was then practised on the British left (something of this history is traced here in Chapter 2). But work of the kind represented here was also responsive to more general changes in the scope and competence of literary criticism. One particularly strong emphasis in advanced literary studies, throughout the 1970s and beyond, was on the possibilities of interdisciplinary research, generated by an active dialogue between academic disciplines. Thus specialists in literature and historical studies, linguistics and philosophy, cultural and media studies were in the 1970s coming together, in conferences and journals, in a way that had not happened before, but has become much more familiar since. In particular, Cultural Studies, as an independent discipline, has come of age, being now well established in many universities. The discipline often remains politicised but in a far more general way than the socialist commitment of earlier practitioners: more likely to be concerned with issues of gender, sexual and racial politics than with questions of economy, party or government.<sup>ix</sup>

The essays that follow are characterised as much by this interdisciplinary tendency, and by the opening up of literary studies to a broader cultural critique, as they are by the occasional stridency of their attempts at political engagement. It was the intellectual liberation provided by Cultural Studies (together with the expanding disciplinary boundaries of literature, history, theatre studies, media studies, sociology) that enabled these essays to address such a wide range of 'Shakespearean' topics, from bardolatry to beer-mats, from Westminster Abbey to the 'Bardcard', from the RSC to supermarket sherry. And it was

the new plurality of methodologies facilitated by a convergence of disciplines that prompted 'Eng. Lit.' specialists to extend their textual analysis to encompass cultural discourses and social practices; and to eagerly adopt new methods of analysing these phenomena, such as semiotics and the critique of ideology. Hence the essays in this volume are able productively to address such 'extra-textual' topics as the 1951 Festival of Britain and the 'Bardfest' of 1994; the tourist map of Stratford and the struggle over the sites of the Globe and Rose theatres; the image of Shakespeare as it appears on banknotes and credit cards, beer mats and sherry bottles. Some of the later essays, especially Chapters Four, Five and Six, begin to develop the analysis in relation to profoundly significant debates on the nature of nationality, using the Shakespeare 'myth' as a framework for analysis of British national culture.

I have edited the essays lightly, removing irrelevant cross-references, making corrections, omitting passages I now believe to be wrong or misguided, but not attempting to dislocate them from the context of their formation. The final piece, 'Everybody's Shakespeare', published here for the first time, began life as a Professorial lecture. I have not tampered with its expository style, in the hope that it may prove a useful and accessible introduction to the field.