

## Review

# The pleasures of poetry on TV



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'No man is an island,' as John Donne famously wrote, but even he might have been a bit surprised to have found himself folded into Simon Schama's silken embrace in **Simon Schama's John Donne** (Tuesday, BBC Two). Still, it tells you all you need to know about the state of mainstream arts programming that the presenter should be considered more alluring than the subject. Coming soon: *Piers Morgan's Christina Rossetti*, *Susan Boyle's Philip Larkin* etc etc.

Yet if Donne's reputation has slumped – a quick vox pop at the start revealed that only one person had heard of him – the same cannot be said of Schama's. By now some viewers may be growing a little weary of his self-hugging, self-delighting ubiquity, but however fierce their feelings they'd have to score him pretty highly on fluency and technical merit. He plainly knows the value of drama in keeping his audience ensnared – in particular, how much time it buys you for more analytical stuff – and he has a sharp eye for the paradoxes that animate character.

In Donne's case, he comes richly stuffed with paradoxes – libertine, zealot and so on. And in a month when a 79-year-old man withdrew his candidacy for the Oxford Professorship of Poetry because of allegations of sexual harassment, it's worth speculating what shrieks and mayhem would have resulted if the young Donne had ever got the job.

One of the strange things about *Simon Schama's John Donne* was that the readings were all done by Fiona Shaw – despite the fact that Donne's authorial voice is clearly male. But while the reasons behind this may have been dodgy – keep that sexual parity steady at all costs – it actually worked very well. Not only was Shaw's reading laden with suggestiveness, she also had some perceptive comments to make about about the poems. Together, she and Schama did some deft anatomising of their own.

Director Clare Beavan, plainly casting around for some apt visual images, had opted for lots of shots of steam whooshing out of London office blocks. Yet this too worked surprisingly well, especially as the office blocks had been shot through a thick curtain of snow. There was a sense – all too apt in Donne's case – of mutual passion struggling to fashion a warm hollow while all around lay chilly impersonality.

Although arts programming may be sliding down the plughole, there were enough poetry programmes on the BBC last week to have brought a smile of incredulity to the late Huw Wheldon's face – Wheldon practically invented

arts programming in the 1960s. **Michael Wood on Beowulf** (Thursday, BBC Four) began in characteristically breathless Michael Wood style: 'Listen, there's a poem. It speaks in the voice of England's past. Like a flame beyond the language of the living.'

So how exactly did this flame work, viewers may have been asking themselves. But any confusion is likely to have been swept aside by Wood's enthusiasm and the richness of his exposition. In Kent, he talked to a group of Anglo-Saxon devotees/nutters about to listen to a dramatised reading of *Beowulf* by the actor Julian Glover. Why did they like the Anglo-Saxons so much? Wood wondered. One man, dressed in a very inexpertly self-knitted blanket and



**Doing Donne** Simon Schama celebrated the metaphysical poet John Donne on BBC Two

matching cloche hat said, 'What's not to like when you can wear stuff like this?'

During the reading, the assembled woadsters sipped thoughtfully at their mead while a dog clamped its paws over its ears and slunk beneath a table. Wood ended as he began, with another blast of faintly absurd, yet stirring rhetoric: 'This poem will be remembered as long as there is poetry in these islands. Until the dragon comes.'

The week's toughest task went to Armando Iannucci, who tried to convince people to love Milton in **Armando Iannucci in Milton's Heaven and Hell** (Wed, BBC Two). Once again there was a vox pop at the start, and once again only one person had heard of Milton. Bravely, Iannucci read out large chunks of *Paradise Lost* in a bid to convince doubters of how wonderful it was.

But for all his intoxication with Milton's language, the programme didn't work as well as Schama's Donne – largely because Milton himself remained hidden behind his own lines. As for whether people will be denuding bookshops of copies of *Paradise Lost*, I doubt it. Perhaps the most telling moment here came when there was a brief shot of a sign in Chalfont St Giles, the village where Milton once lived. Plaintively, and in seeming acknowledgement of the unlikelihood of anyone turning around, the sign read, 'You Have Just Passed Milton's Cottage.'