

Shakinomics, The Globe Theatre, Sunday, 28 November 2010

Bill Leahy introduces the conferences with a few thoughts on Shakespeare and Biography.

Nearly every year a new biography of William Shakespeare is published which recycles the known 'facts'. For any other subject it is only expected that a new biography would be written and published if new information has come to light, but for Shakespeare it seems that the point has become to say the same things as the previous biographies, but because so little is known supposition and invention become central to Shakespeare's life.

Bill Leahy then introduces the Declaration of Reasonable Doubt which can be read online.

<http://doubtaboutwill.org/declaration>

The theme for this conference is 'Shakinomics': Building Bridges. All knowledge and expertise from Actors, Biographers, Independent Scholars, Filmmakers, and Academics should be valued and we should no longer give Academia a monopoly over the interpretation of Shakespeare's life and works.

#### **Dr Sean Gaston presents 'A Little Bit of Coldness; Shakespeare, Author.'**

Gaston draws a connection between the knowledge and perception of Shakespeare and God or Jesus, leaving a little trail of knowledge and information. The absence of a clear biography of William Shakespeare has created a perpetual future in which we will one day know the truth, but if there were attempts to provide a biography for Shakespeare, there would be no Shakespeare. It is this endless hunt for the man, Jesus or Shakespeare, which keeps him alive and well.

Shakespearean biography as an active search rather than a compilation of facts of his life has changed the way biography is viewed. Shakespeare is singled out as a man who is able to be everyone and no one. There is no Shakespeare and that is his true genius. For the plays and poems to continue to exist as created by genius then there can be no Shakespeare. To define the man would be to remove Shakespeare's ability to be everyone and no one.

When it comes to Shakespeare and his life, we are left with only a bit of coldness and emptiness, a void without biography. Shakespeare as a writer of literary work has been lost in his work and becomes an echo of his words. A little bit of Shakespeare disappears with every play that he writes. Disappearing into his work becomes something romantic; there is something beguiling about the genius of being no one.

To have a biography of Shakespeare would change his works; it would rewrite his plays and their meanings. Although we have an urge to know the man, to do so would entirely change the perception of his works.

Gaston goes on to describe who is given the authority to write about Shakespeare and explores Elizabeth Appleton's search for Shakespeare's identity. Should Appleton's lack of fancy abbreviations following her name limit the respectability of her work? Why has academia developed a monopoly on Shakespeare? The exclusivity of Shakespearean studies lessens the competition on who may attach his or her name to the bard's and therefore who may cling to his immortality.

When asked what he would do if he discovered all the facts of Shakespeare's life Gaston replied citing a parable of men discovering the truth and burning the evidence.

#### **Professor Willy Maley presents 'Imagining Shakespeare'.**

Maley begins with an explanation of Shakespeare and economics and then goes on to explore George Moore's little known play *The Making of an Immortal* written in 1927. In this play, Shakespeare comically falls into becoming the author of the plays to protect Sir Francis Bacon. Maley questions why this work received so little recognition and continues to remain unknown.

#### **Fay Weldon and Bill Leahy discuss 'What is Biography?'**

Fay Weldon begins by stating that Franklin Birkinshaw is William Shakespeare. This seemingly odd statement becomes understandable when Weldon explains that her mother's interest in numerology led her to name Weldon Franklin Birkinshaw as this name adds up to the same number as William Shakespeare.

Weldon discusses her own work and motives for writing. She states that writers are practical people and will write what sells. The discussion led to biography. When asked about her autobiography and what she decided to leave in and what to remove, Weldon explains that she attempted to put herself into the context of the society around her, then the story develops its own momentum.

When asked if she ever embellishes, invents, or is creative with the truth, Weldon states that she is not but she remembers it as she remembers it, which may or may not be how it was. She describes this as seeing the truth within the photograph. A writer can use a photograph as a stepping stone which sets the memory in place.

When asked if she cares whether or not people believe her writing, Weldon provides an anecdote in which she read a blog which she could clearly tell to be untrue and how she desired to

inform the writer that the blog was fictitious. Although she did not write to the author of the blog, Weldon concludes that she does care if people believe her. She goes on to explain that when you write a great deal of fiction you begin to forget you are so writing her autobiography was almost an attempt to remember what has happened in her life. Although it was sometimes painful to remember things she would rather not, writing her autobiography made no difference in identifying or 'nailing down' herself.

Weldon moves on to discuss her biography of Rebecca West. When asked why she wrote this biography, she states that at first she did not want to do it as biographies are very time consuming and challenging, but she changed her mind because of the personal connection between West and her own grandmother. When asked if this biography tells the truth about West, Weldon states that it tells a truth about West at that time and about the time itself and how women were viewed. Weldon also notes that she used discretion while writing this biography and noted that if it is not written, then it is forgotten.

When Weldon was asked if she would ever write a biography of Shakespeare, she says that she is in no way qualified to do so and noted that it had never occurred to her before that Shakespeare may not have been an actor which she had learned at this conference. Weldon goes on to note that Shakespeare's biographers do not seem to recognize that he was a human being. She also explains that whether Shakespeare or someone else wrote the plays and poems is unimportant, what matters is the written work.

When Weldon was asked about Shakespeare's sonnets being autobiographical, she responded that they are of such a different form and that it is the emotion of the experience that is relevant and not the sex of the subject. She also notes that it would be very strange for someone to go through life without experiencing those feelings or emotions and that writers can copy emotions and apply them to multiple situations and subjects.

In a closing note Weldon states that, biographies are more readable when the story follows a moral. However, the more they follow this line, the more made up they probably are.

### **Sir Derek Jacobi, Annabel Leventon and Richard Clifford recite passages from Shakespeare's work which relate to today's conference.**

#### **Charles Beauclerk presents 'The Soul's Unerring Mirror'.**

Beauclerk explores the common perception of Shakespeare and the separation of the man and the works. He introduces this idea with a quote from Thoreau; 'One word that shapes the Shakespearean miracle is unconscious.' Shakespeare has been turned into an icon which becomes a 'shallow genius with a deep complex human being.' Beauclerk goes on to question why Shakespeare wrote the work that he did and why we have ended up with an icon of a human being. Why has the man been split from the work? It is this that Greenblatt deals with by stating that 'Shakespeare was a master of double consciousness.' Now we have not one consciousness but two.

Beauclerk then notes that James Shapiro has dealt with the claim that Shakespeare did not have the necessary experiences to write the works by transferring experience and genius to imagination. Beauclerk rebuts this claim by noting that 'if imagination is the needle, experience is the thread' and he knows of no one who has made a tapestry with only a needle. Jonathan Bate solves this dilemma by explaining that the key to dramatic art is insincerity. The author should only pretend to feel what he expresses so that he may equally express what he does not feel.

After explaining the disconnect between the man and the work, Beauclerk goes on to explore the author's motivation for writing. The author has very little idea about the depth of his own work, and he will not know why he has written it. He knows as little about his motives as he does about his own dreams. Only the inner story can reveal his true motives. Therefore, writing can never be an escape, the author's inner story and motivation will be visible to the observant eye. Because of this, a sense of taboo lies around Shakespeare and material is forced between the lines. Beauclerk uses *King Lear* and *Hamlet* as examples of the reading being altered by biography if Shakespeare is the bastard son of the royal queen then his tales will be read in an entirely different light. Thus, the story of Shakespeare's humanity (as separate from genius) is infinitely more interesting than the story of his genius.

#### **Peter Dawkins presents 'Shakespeare's Bacon'.**

Dawkins explores the possibility that Sir Francis Bacon wrote the plays and poems attributed to Shakespeare and the use of false names and passing one's self off as another in the Elizabethan and Jacobean era. Dawkins elaborates by discussing documents left by Bacon. There are many letters carefully preserved by Bacon for posterity but some were also very carefully edited. Several letters include references to travels to other countries including France, Italy, Spain, Germany,

Scotland, and Ireland. While traveling Bacon may have gathered intelligence of all kinds and carried out secret missions. That Bacon's work is left largely unfinished is deliberate. The various versions must be compared to see the full picture. Much more than a quick biography of Bacon at his death is needed to understand the man.

Bacon employed secrecy in his written work. He only intended for his work on the sciences to be read by those able to understand it. He meant for this work to enter quietly into the souls capable of it. Bacon was also known as a secret poet by means of comedy and tragedy. He is known to have used pseudonyms and to have considered using them for his scientific work.

Dawkins elaborates on references to Bacon and his secret life as a free mason and being referred to as Solomon. Dawkins also explains how Shakespeare's monument can be read as referring to Bacon.

When asked if there are any contemporary references to Bacon as a playwright, Dawkins answers that there are references to him as a secret playwright and that he had the ability to write in such a way as to pass the work off as being written by someone else. Dawkins notes that Bacon translated the psalms into English in poetic verse while ill in bed and bored.

Dawkins addresses a connection between Bacon and Toby Matthews. Dawkins claims that Matthews made note of Bacon being known at home and abroad by another name.

When asked how the view of the unconscious could be applied to Bacon, Dawkins notes that it definitely fits and that Bacon is also thought by some to have been an illegitimate son of Elizabeth.

#### **Professor William Rubinstein presents 'Biography: Shakespeare, Neville'.**

Rubinstein explores the idea that Sir Henry Neville wrote Shakespeare's plays and poems. Rubinstein relies on the orthodox chronology of the works. Using this as a basis the works illustrate a clear revolutionary trajectory and clear break in 1601 after which the comedies and tragedies are written. Rubinstein notes that Shakespeare's life does not fit a motivation for writing the plays, nor does the life of any of the other candidates. Too many anomalies occur when examining the known life of Shakespeare and the chronology of the plays.

Henry Neville's life, however, fits. Neville's family lost everything due to Henry VIII. Neville is of mercantile blood and decayed gentry; he was elected to parliament at twenty-one. In 1599 he was appointed ambassador to France and was knighted there. He returned in 1600 and was part of the Essex rebellion. Neville was denounced and stuck in the tower of London for two years with the Earl of Southampton to whom the sonnets were dedicated.

Rubinstein goes on to explain that there are clear instances where Shakespeare's handwriting looks remarkably like Neville's, and in a letter to Ben Jonson there is a mention of basing of Neville's work as Shakespeare's during his lifetime. Rubinstein also notes Neville's son in law writing about Shakespeare as a pseudonym.

Rubinstein concludes noting that the evidence for Shakespeare writing the plays and sonnets is non-existent, but evidence for Neville is vast.

#### **Ros Barber presents 'Evidence and Interpretation: Shakespeare, Marlowe'.**

Barber's scientific analysis of the possibility of Marlowe as Shakespeare begins with a note that our perceptions are filtered through our own opinions. Because we look into something, anything, knowing what we want to get out of it, we often overlook any anomalies or simply explain them away. In order to get past confirmation bias, the human tendency to seek out and give attention to data consistent with one's initial theory, we can take a scientific approach.

Barber uses what she knows of confirmation bias to understand her own bias in the Shakespearean authorship question. In order to do this, she looks at all seventy primary documents available and notes that there is no literary paper trail left by Shakespeare. The absence of something we would expect to see should be taken as evidence. Barber then suggests the possibility that Marlowe did not actually die on 30 May 1593, but his death was a hoax and he then wrote the plays of Shakespeare.

Barber looks at all known information about Marlowe's death including: the only witnesses were known conmen, the time discrepancy of the whereabouts of the witnesses, the possibility of an assassination attempt, the motivations of an assassination, and Thomas Walsingham's connection to the witnesses.

Barber fully explores all potential conclusions and then draws the simplest one as the explanation in an attempt to bypass her own confirmation bias.