

Shakespeare, Founding Fathers, and Fake News

Written by Margaret Evans, Editor

Tuesday, 25 July 2017 14:23 - Last Updated Wednesday, 26 July 2017 15:05



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Today, I'd like to talk about Shakespeare.

Did I just lose you? If so, you clearly haven't heard the news. Shakespeare is the Big Thing this summer. Hot and happening. Cutting-edge. Punk.

And I'm not even talking about the New York Public Theater's controversial *Julius Caesar*,

wherein a Trump lookalike was brutally (and bloodily) assassinated on stage by an angry mob, thus inspiring another angry mob to storm said stage. That's

so
last month.

I'm talking about *Will*, the new TV show that reimagines the life of the young William Shakespeare, on TNT. That's right - the network famous for high art like

Major Crimes,

Law & Order

reruns, and something called

Claws,

is now doing a series about The Bard of Avon.

But this is not your granddaddy's Shakespeare.

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Through costumes, sets, and especially music, the producers of *Will* work hard to convince us that Elizabethan London was a dirty, noisy hybrid of a street festival, a rave, and an orgy . . . a la 1970-something. *Variety*

writes of

Will's

"jarring aesthetic," that it strives to link "London's punk rock fury and decadence with the milieu of Renaissance theatre." Whether or not that link actually exists, the producers make their point, and that point is loud.

Into this garish scene walks a young, innocent William Shakespeare - married father of three - with high hopes of making a name for himself in the theatre, while earning money to send home to his family. Here he encounters an utterly depraved Kit Marlowe, a cynical, debauched James Burbage, a pompous, on-fire-for-God Robert Southwell (here, Shakespeare's cousin), and other *large* characters loosely based on real people. Emphasis on *loosely*. If you're somebody who's studied Shakespeare and/or British history, you may find yourself watching this series with a perpetually raised eyebrow. (Not to mention ear plugs.) Liberties, shall we say, have been taken.

But I can't get too worked up about it. After all, Shakespeare himself often played the same game, taking real figures from history and "tricking them out" into giant characters, turning their lives into legends, using their stories to comment on his own times, taking poetic license aplenty. And those who perform his works have been doing the same thing ever since. (See Trump-Caesar, for instance.)

It's all in good fun, I suppose. The thing to remember, though, is that this is no way to learn your history, kids. If you're serious about history, don't skim the surface of pop culture. Always dig deeper.

Take the Founding Fathers, for instance. Much like Shakespeare, the American founders have enjoyed a great resurgence in popularity. It's been going on for years now, but the reign of *Hamilton* on Broadway, perhaps, represents the apotheosis of the trend.

I know I don't have to state the obvious to you, my dear, astute readers - that you should take your *Hamilton*

with a grain of salt. Use it as a jumping off point. Let it whet your appetite to learn more. But never assume that because you now know all those catchy songs you know the "true story" of Alexander Hamilton and the founding of our country. My seven-year-old niece can rap that entire score, but I would argue she still has some reading to do.

Hamilton

is one man's telling of a complicated tale, seen through a very specific ideological lens. Dig deeper. (I have, and it's been fascinating.)

Revered as they may be, nobody gets used and abused more than the Founding Fathers. If you spend any time on social media, you know how often their words are quoted, misquoted, misattributed, and taken out of context. For every argument you hope to make - or shred - there's a Founding Father-ism ripe for the picking. Or the cherry-picking, as it were. And people cherry-pick shamelessly.

For example, in a recent Facebook discussion, someone trotted out the following James Madison quote in an effort to discredit religion and those who practice it:

"Religious bondage shackles and debilitates the mind and unfits it for every noble enterprise, every expanded prospect."

This FB warrior seemed quite proud of himself, envisioning his Madison quote as an unassailable "mic drop" moment. But I am a bloodhound, and something smelled. I had to dig deeper.

A little research revealed the quotation came from a letter Madison wrote to his good friend William Bradford in 1774. The subject was religious "dissenters" in Madison's state of Virginia - Baptists and Presbyterians who wanted the freedom to practice their religion, instead of the state religion, which was Anglicanism. Madison feared these dissenters might fail in their quest for religious freedom, but he supported them wholeheartedly. Bradford was in Philadelphia, where there was no state religion.

Madison wrote to Bradford, "You are happy in dwelling in a Land where those inestimable privileges are fully enjoyed and public has long felt the good effects of their religious as well as Civil Liberty. Foreigners have been encouraged to settle among you. Industry and Virtue have been promoted by mutual emulation and mutual Inspection, Commerce and the Arts have flourished and I can not help attributing those continual exertions of Genius which appear

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among you to the inspiration of Liberty and that love of Fame and Knowledge which always accompany it. Religious bondage shackles and debilitates the mind and unfits it for every noble enterprize, every expanded prospect. How far this is the Case with Virginia will more clearly appear when the ensuing Trial is made."

So, "religious bondage" here refers to state-sponsored (i.e. government-prescribed) religion. And yes, Madison was much opposed, thank goodness. But he was *not* opposed to religion and the free practice thereof. Quite the opposite. It is, perhaps, a testament to his commitment that I now giggle every time I think of Baptists and Presbyterians as "dissenters."

This, my friends, is just one example of how history once made gets unmade - how words once spoken are plucked from their original context, their very specific meaning twisted to support a very different agenda. It's easy to do the twisting, and it's easy to get twisted. But one's a cheap trick and the other is lazy.

Don't be either - twister or twisted. Dig deeper.

Once you start doing that - digging deeper, with no agenda beyond finding the truth - it's actually quite entertaining. You feel like a detective. I always wanted to be a detective - Nancy Drew was my girlhood hero - and this way I can do it without having to carry a gun or wear a bulletproof vest. Those are so bulky and unflattering.

Seriously, though. In the age of Fake News, we all need to develop our sleuthing skills. Whether it's the past or the present that's in question, there are liars, twisters, and storytellers everywhere. But the truth is out there. We just have to dig deeper.

Margaret Evans is the editor of Lowcountry Weekly. (Read more of her [Rants & Raves](#) or visit her blog at

www.memargaret.com

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