

Preface to the Shakespeare talk

Reform Club, 19 April 2018

This evening's talk was originally written and presented three years ago for the annual Shakespeare lecture at Exeter Cathedral. You might therefore ask why I feel the need to repeat it. There are two reasons. First, I was asked to do a Shakespeare talk and, although I could not set about writing something new, I could present this one again as I very much doubt that many people heard the original. Second, The subject is more relevant now than it was even three years ago. And I can explain why in two short words: 'Fake News'.

It is this second reason that I want to expand on a little before reading the actual paper.

Some of you may know me as the author of the *Time Traveller's Guides* – accessible studies of what the past would be like if we could actually go there. Others may have read my novels. One or two of you may know that my academic background lies in seventeenth social history of medicine. But if I can be said to have a specialism it is the uses of information: how do we know what we think we know about the past. Before I was a historian, I qualified as an archivist, and that gives me something of an advantage because it allows me to combine archival methods with historical ones. In a nutshell, the difference between the two is that a historian is an *evidence* specialist while an archivist is an *information* specialist. Archivists are trained to think about information itself – its creation, copying and control, and the aegis under which the evidence incorporating a piece of information is created, preserved or destroyed. Historians tend to be more interested in what a piece of evidence says rather than how its creator came by his information. Archivists thus are in a very good position to tell historians whether the evidence they are using is reliable or not.

As a result of this dual training, I have often pioneered finding or disproving the linkages between evidence and the reality of the past. This requires the information specialist to cut out such arguments as 'weight of evidence' and professional judgement. In a contestable matter this is essential, as much incorrect and misleading information can be created, copied and circulated that has no basis in reality. Indeed, I cannot stress strongly enough that there is no direct relationship between the amount of evidence and its veracity. If a responsible person – say a medieval king – issues a statement and it is copied by every court official and chronicler, all the weight of evidence is behind that statement *whether it is true or not*. If it is a lie, the weight of evidence supports that lie.

As for professional judgement, it is necessary to set this aside for the simple reason that it is not rooted in the past. It is a product of the mind of the professional in question. However reliable and respectable he or she is, professional judgement cannot prove anything. In the history world, professional judgement is as prone to 'group think' as the experts who almost unanimously declared that Saddam Hussein had stockpiles of Weapons of Mass Destruction capable of damaging the West in 2003. In short, if something *needs* to become a matter of professional judgement, then there is considerable scope for doubt, and the resolution of that doubt is not rooted in the past but in the modern world, with all its different contexts, assumptions and professional relationships and obligations.

As some people may know, I have demonstrated this approach repeatedly over the years, especially in my medieval biographies and the academic articles supporting the more contentious angles in them. Generally historians welcome my work when it confirms what they believe and denigrate it when it proves them wrong. Since the methods employed generally expose the *lack* of

reliable information within the evidence that they had taken for granted, scholars opposed to my work tend to do one of two things: they either ignore it or they dismiss it as ‘another opinion’, on the basis that readers will assume that one opinion is worth the same as any other. In so doing they are behaving irresponsibly, for they are dismissing the very means by which we can differentiate between good evidence and bad, and reducing all history to a matter of professional opinion. They are effectively shouting ‘Fake News’ when anyone disagrees with them. That is not argument. It is protest.

As a result of several battles of this nature, a few years ago I put forward a series of ‘principles of historical methodology’, to try to get people to focus on how we know what we think we know about the past. The first three are very simple, and they illustrate my approach:

1. there is no history without evidence – anything supposed or presumed about the past that is not backed up by evidence is mere storytelling –
2. when it comes to written evidence, the information relayed to us by the writer is only as good as the information he himself received. If the person who informed the author was not part of a chain that stretched back to an eye-witness of the event in question, then the information was not rooted in the past but in supposition, misinformation or deliberate disinformation. There are no two ways about it. Every grain of truth has to be connected by a thread of information to the actual event which it describes.
3. ALL evidence must be taken into consideration. It is *never* good enough to cherry pick pieces that support one argument and ignore those that suggest an alternative.

This gives you some idea of the approach I am going to take in this talk. As you will hear, it was inspired by a great friend of ours – a secondary school teacher of French and Spanish – who stood in my kitchen when the hoo-ha about the film *Anonymous* was taking place in 2011 and asked ‘isn’t there a lot of evidence that Shakespeare didn’t write Shakespeare?’ whatever you think about that film, this was a case of ‘Fake News’ – if you repeat an untruth often enough to people who want to believe it is true, they will start to convince themselves that there must be good evidence for it – and real information underpinning it – and that they are justified in believing it. Thus we have a problem: the misinformed don’t know they have been misinformed and they tend to reject those who tell them that their belief is based on prejudice or wrongly interpreted evidence. They reject people insinuating that they are gullible.

But this is exactly why we have historians. And this is why historical responsibility is more important than ever. Right now this minute, even as I am standing here talking to you, there is a debate going on at the Institute for Historical Research in Senate House under the banner, ‘What does it mean to be a historian in a post-fact, post-truth world?’ I can tell you what it means. It means historians can no longer be storytellers. It is the responsibility of every archivally aware scholar to distinguish between evidence that is based on good information and evidence that is empty of truth.

And that is why I am very happy to have this opportunity to repeat this talk about the Shakespeare authorship debate and historical responsibility. Like so many things to do with Shakespeare, it is fundamentally about our relationship with the human condition – or, in this case, our relationship with the truth.