

Literalism v Literature

Darwin's birthday seemed like a good time to reflect on how the nonsense of creationism still infects our society. Like those moles in holes at the fun fair, every time you think you have whacked it on the head it pops up again somewhere else, sometimes with another name like "intelligent design".

There was a period of less than seventy years from the middle of the 16th century until the start of the 17th during which three literary anthologies were produced. These three works of art are so fundamental to the way that the English language is spoken today that it is impossible to imagine how we would talk to each other if these works had not existed. They provide an enormous number of the clichés and expressions which we use in everyday speech and which allow us to use short-cuts in language without having to explain everything we say in words of one syllable. The first of these books was an instruction manual, but it contained what is probably the best known poem ever written in the English language. The book was *The Book of Common Prayer*.



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The other two anthologies are similar to each other. Both contain stories about historical figures, both have stories which illustrate how morality can work and how people can (and should) behave in various circumstances, and both contain wonderful literary passages with the force to generate spontaneous and powerful mental images in the reader's mind. Both address the idea that people have the power to choose between good and evil, and both talk about how conflict can be resolved and redemption achieved. One of these books is the *Works of William Shakespeare*, the other is the *King James Version* of the Bible. A passing knowledge of both is a requisite quality of anyone claiming to be a literate, educated English speaker.

The big difference between these two works is that nobody thinks that all the words and stories in Shakespeare are true, but millions believe that everything in the Bible is true. If a history student were to quote Shakespeare in an essay about Richard III or one of the Henries and the teacher marked him down for it there would be no outcry, no picket lines outside the school, and no demands for balance and equal time for opposing theories of history. Anyone who tried to complain would be looked at kindly and dismissed as a fool or an attention seeker. School boards would not even put the matter on the agenda. If, however, that same student were to submit an essay in biology saying that dogs are in no way related to cats because they are of different created kinds, or a geology assignment stating that the Himalayas and the Grand Canyon were both less than 10,000 years

old, or an astronomy paper with the calculation that the universe is 12,000 light years in diameter and to base these claims on the contents of the Bible, we would be encouraged to accept these as being examples of the predictions of a scientific theory which demands fair consideration in the classroom.

I have been questioned several times by friends and acquaintances about why I would ever have bothered to read the Bible. My answer is what I said above about the literary canon. Sometimes they will go on to ask why I would bother with the Bible if I don't believe the contents. My reply to that is that I can appreciate *Missa solemnis in C* by Mozart, *Pieta* by Michelangelo or *Madonna dell Granduca* by Raphael without having to believe in the literal existence of the subject matter. Two of my favourite films are *Casablanca* and *Terminator II*, but I don't have to believe in the literal existence of Rick Blaine or John Connor to detect the ways in which both stories address the issues of morality and the choices people can make about right and wrong.

The Bible with its stories and myths is part of the collective consciousness of our civilisation. So are the works of Shakespeare. It is a pity that so many people are seduced by the siren call to unshakeable belief in the unbelievable. If only there was a way to stop their ears with wax, but maybe I have strayed into another set of myths. There are so many of them around, and all equally true. But that's just a theory of mine.

