

# The Common Currency of Contempt

by Theodore Dalrymple



Tomorrow, or the day after, I return from France to England, where I shall be in quarantine for two weeks. I shan't mind this in the least because I have been in quarantine, or estivation, for about three months and have missed what is usually called normal life hardly at all.

In France, where my house is very isolated (at least by European standards), we don't have television or radio, the internet connection is intermittent at best, and the nearest town is too far away to buy the papers daily. When finally I catch up with the news, I discover that they are just the same as if I had followed them with assiduity; and since they rarely bring me much pleasure, I think I am rather better off without them. "Since sorrow never comes too late," as Gray put it,

*And happiness too swiftly flies  
... where ignorance is bliss,  
'Tis folly to be wise.*

Doctor Johnson, whose life of Gray was not as complimentary as it might have been, once said that public affairs vex no man, by which he meant that we are all mainly or exclusively

interested in our own little sphere, and therefore that our vexation over public affairs is largely ersatz, simulated or bogus.

That might have been so in the eighteenth century, but it can hardly be so nowadays. The American government, for example, is incomparably more tyrannical towards its citizens than was George III towards his subjects, and intrudes far more into their day-to-day affairs. The means to do so has increased, is increasing and ought to be reduced: but, as the American senator once said, you can't get a hog to slaughter itself.

If you don't go to public affairs, they will come to you, if in no other form than increased taxation. My isolation, therefore, is an illusion, but since, as Calderón put it, *la vida es sueño*, life is a dream, anyway, I might as well indulge in it for as long as possible.

One of the many things I don't miss about the news is the bad temper with which they are reported, or on which they report. No doubt every age seems bad-tempered to itself, and there is probably no way to measure bad temper scientifically (though I can imagine psychologists somewhere developing a bad-temper scale, supposedly reliable and validated, asking people questions such as "When they announce that your train is delayed do you a) receive it with calm and take out your knitting—score 1—or e) shout and swear at the public address system, which you would like to destroy if you could—score 5). But even if such a scale existed, we wouldn't know whether people nowadays score higher or lower than they would have done in 1950. I have my suspicions, however.

Does bad-temperedness matter, apart from reducing the quality of daily life? I think it may end up destroying democracy and, what is far worse (and not at all the same thing) freedom with it. If Matthew Arnold thought that ignorant armies were about to clash by night when he wrote "Dover Beach", goodness knows what he'd make of the situation now. At least in those days

the foot soldiers of the ignorant armies had the excuse of desperate poverty and real hunger: nowadays, the main nutritional threat to the poor is obesity. Not long ago, the *Guardian* newspaper published an article about hunger in South Africa resulting from the COVID-19 epidemic, and accompanied it by a photograph of women queuing for free food at a soup kitchen in a black township. They were all enormously fat; and while, strictly speaking, being enormously fat is not incompatible with having nothing to eat at the present moment, still—as illustration or propaganda—the picture could hardly have been more ill-chosen.

But to return to the question of bad temper. The vehemence of readers' commentary to be found after an article in a newspaper, especially one of very marked political tendency, is chilling, to me at least. Of course one doesn't know whether these people represent anyone other than themselves, that is to say whether they are typical of any large section of the population, or whether their next address will be an asylum for the criminally insane—who, almost by definition, are a very tiny minority.

In America, where the future of the West is played out, people of differing political standpoints can nowadays hardly bear to be together in the same room. Each thinks the other (there being only two possible standpoints) not merely mistaken but wicked or evil. Luckily, in my French redoubt, I have been able to avert my mind from this, the other and much more serious global warming, that of heating temper.

I have been reading a little about Shakespeare recently, preparatory to a lecture. One of the questions about Shakespeare is who he actually was. It was Delia Bacon, I think, an unusual American lady of the middle of the nineteenth century who eventually went frankly mad, who first suggested that Shakespeare (the author of the plays) was not Shakespeare (the boy from Stratford-on-Avon), but rather her near-namesake, Francis Bacon. Ever since then, the question of

the authorship has agitated many minds, including those of famous people such as Henry James, Sigmund Freud and Mark Twain. One of my two copies of Sir Edwin Durning-Lawrence's *Bacon is Shakespeare* (Durning-Lawrence was a Member of Parliament and militant Baconian) once belonged to Sir Ernest Shackleton, the other to Otto Orren Fisher, who presented Miami University with a copy of all the seventeenth-century Shakespeare folios. Durning-Lawrence wasn't the only MP of his time who was interested in the authorship question: George Greenwood wrote extensively on the same question, without firmly concluding anything except that Shakespeare wasn't Shakespeare.

Since then, other candidates for authorship have been proposed, and there are Oxfordians, Marlovians, Rutlandians, and about sixty other sects, all of whom call those who believe that Shakespeare, the author of the plays, was Shakespeare, the boy from Stratford-on-Avon, *Stratfordians*, rarely without the connotation that they are as primitive as those who believe that the Earth is flat. Not very long ago, I saw an article in a French newspaper claiming that the half-Italian linguist and translator John Florio was the true author of the *Sonnets*, thus proving the value to Britain of the European Union.

I have recently been reading about the *Sonnets*. G. Wilson Knight says, "We do not know when they were written, to whom they are addressed, nor even if they are certainly autobiographical." But A.L. Rowse knows, as does A.D. Wraight. The problem is that what they know—and they know it beyond all reasonable doubt in their own minds—is mutually incompatible. Rowse claimed to have discovered the identity of the Dark Lady, while Wraight claimed that the *Sonnets* were really Marlowe's. Rowse testily dismisses the authorship question altogether, as well as repeatedly saying that those who disagreed with him were a bunch of third-rate ignoramuses at best, or so bad that they did not deserve to be rated at all.

But Wraight's book about the *Sonnets*, published six years after Rowse's, does not even mention him in more than 500 closely printed pages. Her refusal even to mention Rowse is perhaps more eloquent than his repeated sniping at anyone who departs from his views by so much as a minute particular. Rowse, who was undoubtedly a man of great accomplishment, was not modest, however: he once wrote that there would one day be an institute devoted to the study of his life and works. *La vida es sueño*—and so, it seems is *la muerte*.

But Rowse was certainly not alone in his contempt for those who differed from him in Shakespeare studies. The authorship question is largely the preoccupation of retired generals, admirals, civil servants and doctors (poor Dr Orville Owen, author in five volumes of *Francis Bacon's Cipher Story*, constructed a cipher machine that persuaded him that Shakespeare's manuscript lay at the bottom of the River Severn at Chepstow, which he dredged at enormous cost, ruining himself financially in the process and on his deathbed warning people against the authorship question) and these people usually don't suffer fools, which is to say people of views different from their own, gladly, but impute to them the worst of motives.

If this is the case with the authorship question, is it altogether surprising that questions like the future of humanity should not give rise to consensus? It is tolerance, willingness to listen and good cheer that need to be explained, not contempt, denigration and hatred.

First published in