



The killing of George Floyd by a policeman in Minneapolis launched a new global epidemic, one not deadly like Covid-19 but perhaps as infectious—that of insincere breast-beating that, oddly enough, has given new credence to the term institutional racism. One of the institutions busy institutionalizing racism is the Folger Library in Washington, D.C.

One might have supposed that the world's largest library devoted to the works and life of Shakespeare would be spared the tsunami of humbug that has overwhelmed so many other institutions and organized activities, from police forces and motor racing to film academies and football. No one would have considered the Folger a racist institution before Floyd's death or held it responsible for the undoubted injustices in America's past or present. It was an institution dedicated to pure and disinterested scholarship. Now it is transforming itself into the equivalent of the Marx-Lenin Institute in Moscow, with race instead of class as the master-key to the understanding of history and the world. And just as in Marxist historiography, no one can be a disinterested searcher after truth; in the new racist historiography adopted by the Folger, no one can stand outside his race. He must view everything through its lens.

The Folger's director, Michael Witmore, issued a statement that proves, if nothing else, that lifetime study of the greatest writer in English does not necessarily conduce to the composition of good prose. Charity demands that we bear in mind that Witmore was almost certainly under considerable political pressure when he issued his statement, whose sanctimony probably corresponds to no actual feeling of his own. Let he who is always sincere cast the first stone. All the same, Witmore seems to have gone beyond the call, if not of duty, exactly, then at least of political expedience. "Today," he writes, "we are in the midst of a reckoning—a reckoning around racial injustice . . . It has consequences for who we are as a people, and for what the Folger is as a public institution." The weaselly imprecision of these words comes not from any ambiguity in the situation but from the author's uncertainty as to what he is trying to say, though he is clear enough about the impression he wishes to create. What is a reckoning around something? And when he speaks of consequences, what does he mean by them? By what means will they be brought about? What part will he, the director, play in them? Are they good or bad—resistible, or irresistible?

Witmore goes on to say something that he can't possibly mean: "We face many challenges to our shared humanity now, including a global pandemic," he writes. "But none is as urgent as the need to see and name the problem of violence against people of color in the United States."

No problem, none whatever? And what exactly does he mean by people of color? Euphemism, evasion, and moral grandiosity are the order of the day. “The Folger Shakespeare Library,” Witmore continues, “is in the process of becoming an even more public institution, which means telling the stories of all people in a setting of abundant welcome.”

An institution of learning such as the Folger is surely not a proper location for incontinent and uncritical storytelling. This is little more than high-sounding verbiage, though with a certain vague egalitarian connotation. The post-Floyd flow of humbug continues: “If we aspire to be that place of abundant welcome—that is, a truly inclusive institution—we must reckon with the forces that have eroded trust between public cultural institutions and communities of color.”

A truly inclusive institution would either have no content or contain everything, so as to satisfy everyone from burglars to baseball fans to bacteriologists. As for erosion of trust in cultural institutions, this assumes that “communities of color”—all of whose members, in this view, think and act precisely the same, race being the only determinant of human taste, thought, and action—once had trust in the Folger, whatever that might signify. Again, a literary scholar employs entirely meaningless, almost Soviet-style verbiage.

It is clear, then, that the Folger is set fair to become institutionally racist. It intends to hold a series of “critical race conversations,” meaning in all probability uncritical race monologues. “The Folger Institute encourages everyone to engage conscientiously the work of Black and indigenous scholars, and scholars of color, by reading their scholarship, productively incorporating it into syllabi, and using it to frame generative lessons.” In other words, what counts in scholarship is the race of whoever produces it.

At the turn of the twentieth century, would anyone have suggested that people should read the work of Sir Sidney Lee, one of the great Shakespearean scholars of his age, because he was Jewish and there was a lot of anti-Semitism around?

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