

Andrew Motion: a poet laureate with a poetic difference ;
Protests and counter protests

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Abstract

When Andrew Motion was selected and conferred the title of ‘Poet Laureate’ in 1999 there was a flurry of protests. Poet Laureates are normally chosen for a lifetime and it may be a reflection of the controversial nature of Motion’s social equations that he was appointed a laureate for a span of ten years only, according to some of the then leading newspapers. But as a matter of fact we realize as time went by that he accepted the Laureateship only for a period of ten years unlike other Laureates. Motion is the first poet laureate not to be buried as one.

Motion's appointment to the laureate may not have been the cause of any valuable poems, but it has been a catalyst for some. The poet laureateship brings with it even worse treacheries: the very act of putting one's creative impulse in the service of royalty is at one level a difficult task. This paper aims to position Motion’s own thoughts on his creativity and Laureateship. It also attempts to focus on the plagiarism charges Motion faced as a prolific writer.

Key words: Laureateship, creative impulse, protests, New Historicism

Paper

In an article which appeared in (www.independent.co.uk), written by Lewis Jones, on **Andrew Motion: Poetic license to thrill**, the position of a poet Laureate doesn't really call for a lot of respect. He says,

“In modern times the Poet Laureate has tended to be mocked by the literary world, and ignored by the public. The exception to this rule was John Betjeman, who also happened to be the Nation's Teddy bear (a post now held by Alan Bennett), which meant he was loved by the public. True, his official poems as Laureate were mocked, on the grounds that they were, as he cheerfully acknowledged, "not much good", but his reputation has survived”.¹

The centenary of his birth is currently being celebrated in various events, in two biographies (an abridged edition of Bevis Hillier's monumental one, and a brisk and bracing one by AN Wilson), and in a new edition of his Collected Poems, with an introduction by Andrew Motion, the current Laureate.”

The main reason for this is that he actually treats it as a job. Philip Larkin, to whom Motion was acolyte, friend, literary executor and biographer, turned down the laureateship not only because he had ceased to write poetry but also because, as he put it in a letter, "...it has been suggested that the Laureate should be a kind of 'Mr. Poetry' and concern himself (or herself) with promoting poetry on a national basis... The office itself, linking as it does poetry and sovereignty, is a unique honour and should be treasured and preserved, but the temptation to turn it into a 'job' should be resisted.”²

To turn it into a job is precisely what Andrew Motion has done. For a start, he insisted that his modest stipend be paid in modern money (£5,000 a year), and revived the

Laureate's ancient perquisite of "a butt of sack per annum", which is quite a lot of sherry, about 700 bottles. He has enthusiastically embraced and reinvented the role of "Mr. Poetry". He is comfortably the busiest Laureate, and a tireless campaigner - complaining, for example, that the media do not pay poetry nearly enough attention, giving blanket coverage to the Booker Prize, while ignoring the Forward Poetry Prize. He sits on innumerable committees and charity boards, gives readings, visits schools and colleges. He has helped set up the Poetry Archive, a website on which dead and living poets read their work.

There were three contemporaries in the race for Laureateship "The frontrunner for the job of poet laureate is Carol Ann Duffy, the reigning Poet Laureate, a lesbian who was inspired to become a poet after she 'fell madly in love' at the age of 11 with another girl at her convent school." ³

The multitalented Duffy had already been widely honored in Britain: she is a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, and was awarded an OBE in 1995 (It stands for Officer in The Most Excellent Order of the British Empire. It is one of the highest honors a civilian in Great Britain can obtain, short of being knighted. And the CBE in 2001 (The Most Excellent Order of the British Empire is an order of chivalry established on 4 June 1917 by George V of the United Kingdom. The Order includes five classes in civil and military divisions.) ⁴

Duffy is known for poems that are read by academics and common folk alike; The Guardian in 2005 called her "the most popular living Poet in Britain." She first made her name with the 1985 collection *Standing Female Nude*, which won the Scottish Arts Council Award. She followed it with collections including *Selling Manhattan* (1987),

Mean Time (1993, winner of the Whitbread Poetry Award), and Rapture (2005), which won the 2005 T. S. Eliot Prize. Her popular collection *The World's Wife* (1999) looked at famous historical events through the eyes of female participants, such as the wife of Charles Darwin. Duffy moved to Manchester in 1996 and began lecturing at Manchester Metropolitan University, where she later became creative director of the writing school.

While careful not to criticize Ted Hughes, whom she admires greatly, Duffy knows, that it would be inappropriate for any new laureate to be a recluse. Since she admires Ted Hughes she wouldn't want to title him as a recluse. "Seamus Heaney has ruled himself out of being Britain's next Poet Laureate."⁵

"Seamus Heaney turned down the laureateship 10 years ago but for his Irish identity or other political reasons. Though the poet here has nothing against the Queen personally it seems impossible for any Irish poet to write eulogies for the royal family. His close friend Ted Hughes could write "mythological poems about the Queen Mother" because he was "an English patriot" – something Heaney could never have been.

"The favorites now were Carol Ann Duffy, the Scottish-born poet, and Andrew Motion. Tony Blair had to make a recommendation to the Queen within a few weeks."

"The row over the appointment showed no sign of abating as Duffy's supporters claimed she had been rejected because she was a lesbian and outspoken. Duffy told the Guardian that she knew and liked Motion, and admired his last collection, *Salt Water*. But the appointment demonstrated a 'shameful failure of integrity and imagination'.

"The government had a real opportunity to choose a non-establishment poet at this century's close who reflected not only the vital love of poetry felt by its complex community of readers, writers, performers and audiences, but also the changing needs of

the women, children of these multi cultured islands ... Poetry does belong to the people and I am sorry today that so many will be feeling let down'.⁶

Many people were indeed disappointed that a government that came to power with fighting talk about representing women better should have used the heaven-sent opportunity to do just that. The perfect candidate was available in Carol Ann Duffy, who has had more influence on contemporary poetry than any poet her age in Britain. But since they have changed the Laureate tenure to only 10 years, maybe that day will come.

Apparently the Queen and Tony Blair told Andrew Motion that he "didn't have to do anything" when he was appointed Poet Laureate. So he was not being asked to lie to live, but he has, nonetheless, been very industrious while in post.⁷

On meeting Andrew Motion for the first time, the Prime Minister alluded to his expectations from the new Poet Laureate, "I have read that you are getting more left-wing as you get older. Tell me about it," he said. Motion, at 46, is slightly longer in the tooth than Tony Blair. "Give it time," he advised him. Then, pleased both with his bon mot and his warm reception, he went off to see the Queen.⁸

First his appointment was prematurely leaked to the Times, supposedly by a Downing Street source irked that the Telegraph had revealed Blair's wish for a "people's poet". Then came the insults. The choice of Motion ("minor, obscure, conservative") was variously lambasted ("an insult to the country's intelligence", "a bag of shite").⁹

On the other hand, the culture secretary, Chris Smith, said from Cannes: "The Poet Laureate is a voice for poetry and a voice for the nation through poetry. I know Andrew Motion will continue in this tradition and warmly welcome his appointment'." ¹⁰

The new Poet Laureate Andrew Motion raised eyebrows among royalists by declaring he has republican leanings. He is also said to have attacked the government for being too right-wing, in an interview in the literary magazine *The Devil*.

When asked if he was a Republican, he is reported to have said: "It depends how it is done. I'm not a completely cut-and-dried Republican, but I think there are bad examples of Monarchy and good examples."

But his remarks have been criticized by royal commentators who have pointed out that as Poet Laureate; Mr. Motion is a paid member of the royal household. The Oxford-educated poet was believed to have been hand-picked by Prime Minister Tony Blair, as a representative of common man. Mr. Blair opted for the more traditional poet despite speculation that he might appoint a modern-style "people's poet".

Andrew Motion is a man of boundless talent; but as the poet laureate, he had become an object of pity.

It is easy to understand why Motion agreed to become laureate. The job was invented for Ben Jonson in the 16th century and many deserving bards like Dryden, Wordsworth, Tennyson, Bridges and Masfield all wore the laurel crown. But even those great men were not at their best when writing in their official capacity. Therefore it is illogical and unjustified to denigrate Motion in this respect. Motion loves to court controversies. Towards the closing of his term as poet-laureate, he has invited for himself yet another set of controversies. These controversies in a way diluted his credentials and tainted his poetic image. During his tenure as the Laureate, Sir Andrew Motion faced many an accusation

of shamelessly 'ripping off ' a military historian's book for his Remembrance Sunday poem, a day where people remember everyone that died in World War 1.¹¹

Shephard, who produced the acclaimed television series *The World at War*, told *The Times* that 'the' voices from a variety of sources were not 'found' by Motion, but by myself."

He continued: "Of the 152 lines in *An Equal Voice*, all but 16 are taken directly from *A War of Nerves*. There is a word for this. It begins with 'p' and it isn't poetry.

He was obviously accused of plagiarism and 'shameless burglary' by military historian Ben Shephard. Mr. Shephard said most of the Motion poem was copied from his own book, *A War Of Nerves*, about the history of medical psychiatry.¹² Mr. Shephard, who also produced the *World at War* television series, complained that Sir Andrew had simply extracted 'sexy sound bites' from his book. "The entire first stanza," Shephard said to illustrate his point "is taken almost unaltered from a letter written by the American psychiatrist Thomas W. Salmon in 1917".

The poem was printed in the *Guardian* newspaper. He said Sir Andrew had predominantly used the words of 'soldiers and doctors' and so had not breached copyright law. But he added: 'Morally, it's another story.'¹³

The poem, *An Equal Voice*, by Motion was published as a tribute to war veterans and described as a 'found' poem rather than an original work.

The argument specified by Shephard has a clear element of truth in it. It is quite perceptibly clear that Motion had resorted to plagiarism-unbecoming of a Poet Laureate.

Motion might, perhaps, have got in touch with Shephard before publishing the poem. But what he's done may be 'contentiously' with Shephard's consent, nevertheless it is plagiarism-that too by a Poet Laureate.

There's a good and a bad side to this spat- the good is that both Motion's poem and Shephard's book will be revisited. The bad is that accusations of plagiarism linger, like bad smells, fouling writers' reputations. Alas, what will be dimly remembered about Motion is the Remembrance Day poem. It's a pity.

Motion could certainly have revealed his sources, where he was getting this 'found' material from. He indeed did invite trouble. Though Motion defends himself using the concept of 'found poetry' and if the "Found" bits are above a certain percentage of the whole then he could be in trouble legally, but his extremely vague reference to sources hopefully may play the savior for him.

Motion defends himself using the concept of 'Found Poetry'. The Wikipedia defines 'Found Poetry' as,¹⁴

"A type of poetry created by taking words, phrases, and sometimes whole passages from other sources and reframing them as poetry by making changes in spacing and/or lines (and consequently meaning), or by altering the text by additions and/or deletions. The resulting poem can be defined as either treated: changed in a profound and systematic manner; or untreated: virtually unchanged from the order, syntax and meaning of the original."¹⁴

Sir Andrew, paradoxically enough is also a professor of creative writing. He valiantly rejects Mr. Shephard's criticism. 'He doesn't get it, does he?' he said.¹⁵

'This is ridiculous. He has completely got the wrong end of the stick. 'To blow off about it like he has done completely misunderstands what poetry is.' Motion argued that every time he quoted a line of poetry in a book he has always paid for it.' That does not clear his tarnished image. His creativity is put on hold and will impair his poetic credentials even he 'paid' for it.

The poet Laureate argued that he had 'stitched together' the words of several generations of shell-shocked soldiers from the First World War to the present day. 'It's a poem by them, orchestrated by me,' he said in his introduction to the work.

According to Ben Shephard, (as quoted saying in dailymail.co.uk), Motion has added nothing new or original to this subject. Shephard has a further issue. He seems to have had no problem if his work was not lazily ripped off like this without any recompense - what did the Guardian pay Motion for copying out my research? added Ben Shephard.

Sir Andrew, who credited Mr. Shephard's book in his introduction to the poem, said he was following the 'long and honorable tradition of 'found' poetry which 'goes right back to Shakespeare'.

For example, Shakespeare's Antony and Cleopatra borrowed whole passages from Sir Thomas North's Life of Mark Antony he said, including the description of her barge: "The poop was beaten gold; purple the sails . . ." ¹⁵

To mark Remembrance Day, Andrew Motion has published 'An Equal Voice' --- now claiming to be a 'found poem' about shellshock --- in The Guardian. Today he stands accused as a plagiarist by military historian Ben Shephard. What Motion actually stitched together were 17 passages from my book A War of Nerves: the 'voices from a

variety of sources' were not 'found' by Motion, but by myself. Of the poem's eight stanzas, five consist entirely of material from *A War of Nerves*, very slightly rejigged; in the remaining three stanzas, extracts from the book sit alongside reworked passages from Siegfried Sassoon — the only other source used. Of the 152 lines in 'An Equal Voice', all but 16 are taken directly from *A War of Nerves*. There is a word for this. It begins with 'p' and it isn't poetry.¹⁶

Shepard wants Motion condemned for two related issues: breach of copyright, and plagiarism.

There seems to be no dispute that Motion lifted long passages from Shepard's book, that he did not acknowledge the extent of that use, and that he did not request permission. Shepard hits out at double standards: 'Every time I quote a line of poetry in a book, I have to pay.' That isn't quite accurate: one line would fall within 'fair use', although the amount taken by Motion clearly exceeds it. But having acted as both poacher and gamekeeper, I know that it is a painstaking and extremely expensive process to get permission to quote from copyrighted work. Copyright law applies to ex-Poet Laureates as much as to hoi polloi. Even so, I can't see this as an especially egregious fault. Historians and literary scholars (and especially bloggers...) who work with modern materials know how treacherous the terrain of copyright, permissions and fair use is. There is a reason why very little case law exists: no one can afford to go to court over a few lines of poetry.¹⁷

Potentially much more serious is Shepard's accusation of plagiarism. Motion should not be allowed to get very far with a defence based on whataboutery: what about Shakespeare, etc. And what about the tradition of 'found poetry'? The argument that

adding line breaks gives the poet an exemption from copyright laws and academic standards is, I'm afraid, risible. Anyway, as Shephard points out, all the finding was done by him, not by Motion.

Nevertheless, on first publication of 'An Equal Voice' The Guardian made clear (obviously at Motion's prompting) that it is a found poem. Coupled with the epigraph from Shephard, that highlights not only the second-hand nature of Motion's words but also his likely source. The poem's acknowledgements are not at all satisfactory, and they should have been handled much more adroitly in order to avoid just this kind of controversy. There is, though, enough evidence to suggest that the omission was careless, high-handed, but not intentionally deceitful.¹⁸

The matter ought to have been sensibly resolved with a private apology to Ben Shephard (who has been clearly wronged), a retrospective payment of permissions fees, and an undertaking that proper acknowledgement will be made in any subsequent reprinting of the poem. Instead, we have an unseemly public row leading up to Remembrance Day.

Motion makes clear in the introduction to his Remembrance poem that its title An Equal Voice is a direct quotation from Shephard and refers to his history book by name. "It is the case that it does give a bit more publicity for his book which has been out for eight years," Motion said. "It's not for me to say whether he should be grateful for that, he told the dailymail.co, u .k.

"I have done absolutely nothing that is underhand. As far as getting paid for it, it was always my intention to give whatever The Guardian have paid me to the organisation

that exists to benefit people who have got shell-shock. I haven't said that, because it would have looked as if I am trotting about trying to find a halo."

As for changing "kiddies" to "children", Motion said that this was done to keep a consistent tone throughout the poem and avoid sentimentality. Perhaps it amounts to nothing more than a literary misunderstanding: the historian examined the poem like a work of history and the poet read the history book as if it were a poem.

'I have always felt that with the best will in the world, writers writing poetry about war with no experience of fighting themselves do run the almost inevitable risk of grandstanding. 'I thought this was one way to get around this - to give voice to the people who were there. Where the artist comes in is around selecting or arranging.' He said to the dailymail.co.uk

He said he had done nothing 'underhand', adding: "I'm very sorry he doesn't like it, but as far as I'm concerned I feel OK about it." Sir Andrew said any fee he received would be passed to a soldiers' charity.

He termed the plagiarism claim as "ridiculous". In fact Motion feels that his poem has brought Shephard's out-of-print book (pre-owned copies are currently languishing around millionth on Amazon's bestseller list) back into the limelight. Shephard should be grateful. He isn't. says Motion to the guardian. ¹⁹

Reproduced here is an account of both the poems. At this point of time it seems difficult to see through the intentions of both the poets. It's an alarming piece of substantiation of poetic impropriety.

SPOT THE DIFFERENCE

From An Equal Voice by Andrew Motion

'War from behind the lines
is a dizzy jumble.
Revolving chairs, stuffy
offices, dry as dust
reports...'

'marching men with
sweat-stained faces and
shining eyes...'

'bloody clothes and
leggings outside the canvas
door of a field hospital...'

'I have been away too long
and seen too many
things...'

From A War Of Nerves by Ben Shephard

'War from behind the lines
is a dizzying jumble.
Revolving chairs, stuffy
offices, dry as dust
reports...'

'marching men with
grimy faces and
shining eyes...'

'bloody clothes and
leggings lying outside the
door of a field hospital...'

'I have been in the front line
so long, seen many
things...'

For a layman who reads these poems will find absolutely no difference in the two. If poems are written for laymen then do they know what plagiarism is? In the world of literature it is considered a criminal offence. It is a cowardly act of larceny and pilfering. People who have read Motion's other works will hardly agree that he could ever commit a crime of this sort. Though plagiarism can be accidental, it's sometimes done on purpose

and that's just being lazy. If laziness in art can lead to plagiarism I regret to say that under no circumstance Motion is a plagiarist.

On the other hand it is important to remember Andrew Motion is a court poet with a difference. He does not just stick to the definition of a Poet Laureate. When he decides to walk an extra mile by reaching out to the undiscovered horizons of other poet Laureates, we see a man of 'insights' in Motion, a man who plunged himself into themes related to the common man, politics and even ethnic affairs.

ANDREW Motion knew of some of the prerequisites for the job of Poet Laureate: an interest in royalty, current events and even the metaphorical flak jacket required to deal with fallout from the poison pens of the critics. But what he was totally unprepared for, when accepting the job, was the assumption that he would become public property. He goes on accepting the protests from his critics whenever he pens down a new poem.

Though Motion's protests and counter protests are not that loud and clear, he would go down the pages of British Poetry, as a term Poet Laureate who dared to stand grounded on reality, in spite of all the temptation to eulogize, appease and in turn be rewarded with lifetime Laureateship.

His concern for the masses, his subdued protests against the Iraqi war, his measured awe for the Royalty and above all his refusal to pen any line that would be a sacrilege to the great tradition of his country, are traits that continue to endear him both to the classes and masses.

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