

UK: Simon Armitage's poem on the queen's death: Laureateship in opposition to poetry

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The death of Queen Elizabeth II revealed much about the state of the British bourgeoisie's institutions. It also shed light on their impact on cultural life.

Artists have been fawning over the late monarch in an uncritical way that speaks badly for the general artistic climate. It says something that novelty Irish pop siblings Jedward stood heads above the crowd of "serious artistes" for bravely speaking out against "British imperialism" and calling for an end to the monarchy.

The limitations of court-sanctioned roles are seen in the work of the current Poet Laureate, Simon Armitage, a talented writer. His "Floral Tribute," on Elizabeth's death, demonstrates, unsurprisingly, that no one with an ounce of artistic integrity should ever accept such a role—no matter how they try and justify doing so to themselves.

Previously a life appointment, the position of Poet Laureate has been a 10-year tenure since 1999. Remuneration is an honorarium of around £6,000 a year and 720 bottles of sherry over the duration. There is no requirement to produce poems on the royal family, but there remains an expectation that national occasions will be marked.

Armitage had written "about a dozen laureate poems" before his first royal piece. He was appointed in 2019. After working as a probation officer, he has held various academic posts teaching creative writing and as Professor of Poetry at Oxford and Leeds. He is a good critic and advocate of poetry and access to literature, which he is evidently trying to use his Laureateship to advance. He is spending a week each year of his tenure touring selected libraries, giving a poetry reading, sometimes introducing a local guest poet, and trying "to involve communities where English might not be the first language."

Most of his "laureate poems" show similar, healthy impulses. Armitage has written frequently of science and nature, produced pieces for the bicentenary of John Keats's death, and inaugurated a new orchestral rehearsal venue.

He is a generally sympathetic and liberal writer. This comes across well in lyrics responding to Covid-19, commissioned by the Huddersfield Choral Society from their choristers' experiences. "The Song Thrush and the Mountain Ash," set to music by composer Daniel Kildane, is poignant:

She said she liked
the flowers I sent
but wondered why
they had no scent,
and why the food
had lost its taste,
and why the nurse
had covered her face?

But the conformism of Armitage's royal poems strips away their artistic merit. His first royal poem followed Prince Philip's death. "The Patriarchs – An Elegy" portrayed a noble self-sacrifice alongside his spouse:

Husbands to duty, they unrolled their plans
across billiard tables and vehicle bonnets,
regrouped at breakfast. What their secrets were
was everyone's guess and nobody's business.

The jubilee poem "Queenhood" again reiterated official presentations of Elizabeth as a noble individual, able through personal sacrifice and heroic acceptance of duty to stand above the realities of the class structures she embodied: "A priceless freight for a young woman to bear, / but, draped and adorned, a monarch walks forward / into the sideways weather of oncoming years."

The more he embraces this position, the worse the writing:

Queenhood: it is law and lore, the dream life
and the documentary, a truthful fantasy.
For generations we will not know such majesty.

His "Floral Tribute" to the queen on her death is a double acrostic, the first letter of each of its lines spelling "Elizabeth" twice. Armitage has described this as a "problem to which the poem becomes a solution," enabling him to "stretch [his]

imagination” and “encode” Elizabeth’s name, connecting it with the “little signs and signals” of poetry of Elizabeth I’s age (1558-1603). That sounds a little desperate.

The technical accomplishment, and use of that conceit, cannot disguise that the poem is an uncritical acceptance of how the queen was represented. Armitage calls his lily/poem “a token of thanks.”

What results, among some good lines, are banalities driven by the official message he is conveying: “A promise made and kept for life – that was your gift,” and, “The country loaded its whole self into your slender hands, / Hands that can rest, now, relieved of a century’s weight.” This is embarrassing.

The problem is not Armitage’s talents, but the dead weight of the institutions he has embraced. The former Laureate Carol Ann Duffy’s poem on the queen’s death, “Daughter,” failed miserably for the same reasons, It is so bad that it makes Armitage’s effort look good by comparison—at times barely intelligible, fawning, with dreadful lines like, “Soon enough they would come to know this had long been the Age of Grief; / that History was ahead of them.”

Bowing before the “weight of history” narrative, Duffy even writes of “iPhone torches linking back to medieval flame.”

Just as Elizabeth’s death ends any notion the monarchy could be “apolitical” it also disproves the ludicrous illusion that the Laureate can be independent of its patronage.

The role has always been political. Establishing laureateship as an office within the royal household was linked with the development of a constitutional monarchy after the English revolution.

John Dryden, the first Laureate, was appointed by Charles II in 1668. In 1689, Dryden—a Catholic convert—became the only Laureate ever removed from office. He refused to take the Oath of Allegiance to William and Mary, whose consolidation of bourgeois power in 1688 is still gratefully called “The Glorious Revolution” by the bourgeoisie.

Political safety has always been a criterion in selection. Since 1790, the Laureate has been nominated by the prime minister for the monarch’s approval, hence the appointment of bad poets, or decent poets of known secure establishment sympathies. William Wordsworth became Laureate in 1843, long after his early contact with radicalism was over, succeeding the thorough-going reactionary Robert Southey, who was mocked at every turn by Lord Byron.

Political sensitivities excluded excellent poets. After Alfred, Lord Tennyson’s death in 1892, the post remained vacant for four years, in part because the outstanding potential successors included people like the socialist William Morris. It went eventually to the unreadably bad Alfred Austin.

Following the death of royalist Ted Hughes in 1998, the move to 10-year appointments was bound up with efforts by Tony Blair’s Labour government to rehabilitate the royal family after the death of Princess Diana. The cultivation of images of a monarchy somehow above politics and the state

was accompanied by suggestions that the Laureate might be seen as unconnected with them, or untainted by the association.

Not all poets bought that. Ruling himself out, Tony Harrison wrote:

I’m appalled to see newspapers use my name
as ‘widely-tipped’ for a job I’d never seek.
Swans come in Domestic, Mute, and Tame
and no swan-upper’s going to nick my beak.

His earlier imaginary “Celebratory Ode on the Abdication of King Charles III” had wondered, “Why has it taken all this while / descepting ‘this sceptred isle’?”, promising:

and hymn the Crown’s demise I will
with this black goose-feather quill
I’ve saved for ages just to write:
Goodbye! Good riddance, Divine Right!

Occasional poetry is not always his best work, but Harrison’s use of classical verse and poetic history here is a striking contrast to Armitage’s liberalism. In 1999 Andrew Motion was appointed. Harrison was coruscating on Motion’s paean to Diana, noting of the tercentenary of the execution of Charles I that “the anniversary’s gone by with not a line / from toadies like Di-deifying Motion.”

Even Motion later called the job “very, very damaging” to his work. By 2009, more poets were openly against the post. Wendy Cope called for its abolition, echoing Rudyard Kipling that a poet “has no business being a paid employee of the state.”

Cope said the Laureateship “blurs the distinction” between “worldly and artistic success,” resulting in bad verse produced to order by good poets. Armitage is not the first Laureate to believe it could be used to popularise poetry.

Cope acknowledged similar efforts by Motion, but delivered the necessary verdict on such schemes: “Perhaps there is a role for a poetry advocate ... But I believe that the best way for a poet to serve the art is to remain free to get on with writing the poems that he or she wants to write.”



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