

In-person public witness testimony on NEH FY 2014 funding, presented to the House Interior Appropriations Subcommittee - Michael Witmore, Director, Folger Shakespeare Library - March 17, 2013

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

My name is Michael Witmore. I am Director of the Folger Shakespeare Library, and I am here to testify on behalf of the National Humanities Alliance and the Folger Shakespeare Library in strong support for the Administration's FY 2014 request for the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). I refer you to my written testimony for specific details about our funding request for NEH and the ways in which this funding will help us all achieve critical national goals.

This morning, I would like to talk with you about what my own experiences have taught me about the value of the humanities. Early on in my career I had the privilege of teaching at a university renowned for its engineering and computer science programs. As a young assistant professor of English, I spent nearly a decade teaching Shakespeare plays to students who would eventually go on to careers at Google and Intel. Many of these students had mastered linear algebra by the time they were freshmen, but they still found Shakespeare difficult.

I remember, for example, trying to explain why Shakespeare chooses to have *Macbeth* express his guilt by saying that his bloody hands will “incarnadine” the sea. If you Google the word “incarnadine” on your smart phone, you will get roughly the same word Shakespeare would have found had there been dictionaries in 1606. The word “incarnadine” refers to the color of flesh: it is an adjective like pink, red or green. But when Shakespeare uses the word, he uses it as a verb. Macbeth is going to incarnadine or *make red* the sea, his guilt seeping into everything around him. It is the shock of this word, its rarity and unusual use, that makes incarnadine a good choice.

But just how good is it? Inspired? Brilliant? Pretty darn good?

When asked this sort of question, my students would say, “if it can’t be expressed as an equation, it’s an opinion.” This may be true, but it’s also true that a lot of what makes us tick cannot be stated as an equation. When I think about the value of the humanities to our world today, I think about the ways in which writers like Shakespeare have shaped the way we speak and think in this country. Lincoln was a passionate reader of Shakespeare – he could recite soliloquies from *Richard III* by heart – and this reading taught him how to be a powerful leader. What would happen if you subtracted Shakespeare from our world, from our schools, and from our culture? Without this writer, America would not have produced a Lincoln, a Frederick Douglass, or an Emily Dickinson, all of whom were steeped in the plays of this writer.

We have immense technical skills as a society. There are equations that can guide Google to the correct, pre-Shakespearean adjectival definition of “incarnadine” in less time than it will take me to finish this sentence. But it takes imagination to want to google this rare word, and a taste for the humanities to know that using “google” as a verb tells us something profound about the way networked information has changed our society.

Having worked with computers to analyze the plays of Shakespeare, I know something about the power of statistics and data, and so have learned to see even the world of English literature from the point of view of the engineers I once taught. Today the NEH is supporting just this kind of work, work that brings scientists and humanists together in ways we could not have imagined even a decade ago.

Those of us who work in the humanities are straddling a moment in which traditional forms of reading and reflection are complemented by the techniques of data-analysis created by engineers and mathematicians. If our economic prosperity as a country depends on our abilities in the STEM fields of Science, Technology and Mathematics, our capacity for creativity, innovation and leadership will similarly depend on our strength in the humanities. We will always need people who use words well, and who know what they mean, just as we need people who understand the technologies that make the world go round. Perhaps we are living in what Shakespeare called a “brave new

world,” one filled with new challenges, opportunities and ideas. Brave as it is, that world is ours: *and it is one in which the humanities must play a major role*. For advancing us along this future path, and for what I hope is your full funding of the NEH, I thank you.