



Such Stuff podcast
Season 4, Episode 1: Notes to the Forgotten She-Wolves

[Music plays]

Imogen Greenberg: Hello and welcome to another episode of Such Stuff, the podcast from Shakespeare's Globe.

This week we've been behind the scenes with Notes to the Forgotten She-Wolves, a series of five special events in the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse.

Another extraordinary commission from our new writing team, we asked 20 writers to compose a note to a woman who had been forgotten, misremembered or erased from history. The results – twenty unique pieces being performed across five nights – are as complex, extraordinary and powerful as the women themselves.

[Music plays]

IG: So, we'll be hearing from Matilda James, our producer, and Jessica Lusk, our literary manager, on commissioning the pieces and how this collective of women writers and the women who inspired them came together.

And we chat to three of our writers – Jenet Le Lacheur, Amanda Wilkin and Philippa Gregory – about the women they dedicated their notes to... and how they communed with these women and channelled that into their pieces.

We'll also be asking how and why these women's stories are still so resonant today, and how looking to the past can help us to have hope moving forwards.

[Music plays]



IG: First up, producer Matilda James and literary manager Jessica Lusk discuss commissioning the piece and why work like this is so important to us, here at Shakespeare's Globe.

Matilda James: I'm Matilda, I'm a producer here and I'm producing *She-Wolves* with Jess.

Jessica Lusk: I'm Jess, literary manager. So, I produce some stuff and also do a bit of script development and help.

MJ: OK, so *Notes to the Forgotten She-Wolves* came out of a conversation that Michelle Terry had with Sandi Toksvig around Sandi's ongoing campaign to address/ redress the gender imbalance of Wikipedia. At last count, one and a half million biographies in English on the site and only 17% of those are of women. And as Michelle was putting together the winter programme for the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse - which was all around sort of she-wolves and shrews and ideas of femininity and depictions of womanhood and who gets to decide what that looks like and who gets to decide how women are like remembered and talked about - it felt really appropriate to try and find a space where we could think about some of the women who had been forgotten about from history, who had been erased or made anonymous or kind of misremembered in any way.

JL: All of the, mainly female, writers that sort of send in pitches or ideas now are all kind of off the back of Emilia and they all say 'I found this extraordinary woman' or 'I'd never heard of this person' and 'Now I'm researching this person' and 'Have you heard of her?' and 'Have you heard of her?' So, it does feel like it's opened a box of Herstory that we didn't have before.

I remember being there on the first preview of Emilia and like loads of women just didn't leave the theatre. And like security were trying so hard, like 'Get everyone out, get everyone out'. And I just remember watching this woman just stand with tears like streaming down her face with a smile on her face just looking at the stage for



such a long time. And it was like amazing that it did just sort of open something in people that I think they really needed.

MJ: Yeah, right. And it is actually what's so beautiful about it is the kind of accumulative effect of hearing people go... being able to find space for some of those things about 'Have you heard of this woman?', 'Have you heard of her?', 'Listen to this kind of extraordinary nugget of history that we didn't know or that had fallen through the gap somewhere'. And actually, what's really nice about this is that some of those have found a little place.

JL: Mmmm, yeah.

MJ: That we wouldn't be able to support... you know, we can't commission another 20 Emilia's, we can't afford to do that and it wouldn't be right to either necessarily. 'Emilia was just the beginning' is true in terms of what you want to expand out into the world but isn't necessarily the right model to then go 'Brilliant, and here's another one and here's another one'. Because it wouldn't be the right dramatic form to find to tell those stories anyway. But what's really lovely is um to know that in the Playhouse over the next couple of weeks we're going to have all of these really, really different women's names just said out loud and chatted about for a bit. In ways that are... we have no idea how tonally they'll sit next to each other yet. We don't know what the appetite will be yet for this form but I think we do know that's it been like a real pleasure to...

JL: Yeah absolutely. And what's lovely is that every writer, you send the brief to and the provocation... it takes all of them like a couple of minutes to say 'Oh yeah great I want to write about this person'. Everyone has a woman, and everyone's interpretation of that person has been so joyously different.

ML: Like Una Marson, who Winsome Pinnock has written about, the first black woman to work for the BBC, and this extraordinary Jamaican poet and dramatic who I'd never heard of at all and I don't think even the BBC really kind of memorialise in any specific way. To kind of women who've been made anonymous by time, you



know Emma Franklin's piece is extraordinary about a trans woman in the 60s who is only recorded in a gender that she wouldn't recognise as anything to do with her. Or the woman who's the kind of archetype for the death mask who was pulled from the Seine as a teenager and who the pathologist was so fascinated by that he just like made a death mask of her. Like the weird kind of fetishism over some of these women as well as the capacity for them to have been like written out is really odd and a kind of amazing dynamic to play with I think.

JL: And also, what it's revealed is something really lovely about it not just about celebrating women who were amazing or extraordinary or in same way, yeah extra ordinary but actually there's something really lovely about recognising the ordinary or even the mother of a criminal or someone's grandmother just because a writer is so keen to just hear that person's name in a space. Like there's something really lovely about going we don't just have to remember the women that did something incredible because actually they all were.

ML: Yeah, right. There's a sort of really beautiful kind of everywoman thing to it as well, isn't there?

IG: Emilia did a really interesting thing of taking the model of the history play and turning it inside out. Just from the writer's that I've spoken to, the way that they're sort of pilfering work and re-appropriating work has been really interesting. Is there something interesting there not just in taking the women back from history but taking the mode of voice, like taking the way that things have been written and re-appropriating them?

JL: Hmmm.

ML: Mmmm. That is really interesting actually. Like I think what we've tried to do is allow space for it to feel just like it needed a dramatic arc? It didn't need, they haven't really needed beginnings, middles and ends in terms of their full story. And in fact, we've really tried to steer the writers away from... don't just tell us the whole



story of this woman, pick the thing that has drawn you as a writer most to that person and play with that. And actually, isn't there something to be interested in in giving the audience just a taste and making people leave the room and go I want to find out who that was, I didn't get the whole story there as opposed to it being lots and lots of bio-pics... or like biopics... I never really know how to say that word. But you know...

JL: Yeah.

MJ: ... here are the stories of twenty women you have not heard of. It's more that here's a chance to hear from or to or something in honour of people who we want you to go away and remain fascinated by I suppose.

JL: Yeah.

[Music plays]

IG: Next up, three of our writers Jenet Le Lacheur, Amanda Wilkin and Philippa Gregory tell us about the women who have inspired their Notes to the Forgotten She-Wolves... and give us a sneak preview of some of the extraordinary pieces they've written.

[Music plays]

Jenet La Lacheur: I'm Jenet La Lacheur and I've selected Mary Anning as my focus for this piece and I chose her because I'm a massive palaeontology nut and she always stood out to me as something of an anomaly in 19th century palaeontology and science in general as a woman who was working class, unattached, unmarried, who made massive strides, not only personally but also in palaeontology as a whole, as a discipline. She was incredibly intelligent, industrious, rigorous, she was not formally educated but she managed to pretty much change the scape of palaeontology not quite single-handedly but her contributions are incredible considering all of the obstacles that she had to overcome. It didn't take me very long to hit upon Mary Anning because I literally just



couldn't think of anyone else that drove me to want to you know create the piece. So, I very quickly hit upon the idea of it being about Anning, of it being some kind of epic Jacobean poem rather than a sort of prose piece because the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse is such a specific space and I feel like you have to honour that space. And I remembered a piece by John Donne which I'd read a few years back called The Flea which had an amazing poetic form. It had a structure which was very kind of... it was very regular, very regimented but also very alive and very driving. So, I basically stole that structure and I sort of implanted it into what would be 34 stanzas of epic poem. And I think that was an absolute God-send. Because it's one of those things... it's almost hypnotic but it never feels staid or boring or too regular. And I find that when you're working with constraints like that it basically writes itself and as a writer you just have to get out the way of yourself and allow it to happen.

[Extract from Jenet's piece]

JL:

Your father took you both hunting
For ammonites, those corrugated rings
And belemnites, those squid-like things
That superstitious folk dubbed devil's fingers
But when he died in a fall
Leaving thy family no wage at all
 Thou didst take it upon thyself
 To ensure Joseph and thy mother's health
 And so thou didst begin to fill thy shelf

The long dead soon were thy lifeline
And though they saw thee through just fine
A treasure waited for thy brother
Which would shortly lead thee to discover
An untold wonder in the cliff
Which at the age of twelve was thy first whiff



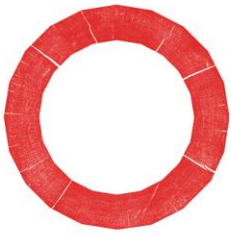
Of the greatness which was in store
When he unearthed a skull and thou found'st more
Of what would be the world's first ichthyosaur

A Mesozoic behemoth
A precocious discovery which doth
E'en now remain thy greatest find
And captured the attention of all kinds
Including Henry Hoste Henley
A lord who bought it for three and twenty
It sold for forty-five some eight
Years later and its tag, to really grate,
Read "Crocodile in a Fossil State"

For at this point in time of course
It was even to science widely thought
That naught evolved or went extinct
That weren't to do so, you would have to think
God's great creation imperfect
And all the finest minds did this reject
But not thee, no, thou saw'st the truth
For thou wast such a geologic sleuth
Thou knewest more than they, e'en in thy youth

But in spite of thy brilliant mind
Thou didst thyself unfortunately find
Quite at the mercy of the time
Barred for the unforgivably rank crime
Of (whisper) *womanhood* from the
London Geological Society
E'en though thou found'st their specimens
And did possess more knowledge than the men
Thou wast left off descriptions in the end

And in this story
Of erasure which thou would'st hope would be
But a phase you're in some sterling company
A home truth I feel all too acutely.



When history is writ by those with power
The winds outside the ivory tower
Are met with mass amnesia
A feat made exponentially easier
When it's denied we're who we say we are.

[Music plays]

JL: Well I kind of fell on my feet a little bit because I knew she was an extraordinary figure but I didn't realise until I started doing the real in-depth research just how amazing it was and how much material there would be to work with. I feel like... when you say communing, I mean I wrote it with the idea that she would be able to hear it in mind even though it's an impossibility. But that was kind of what guided me about what to touch upon and just kind of how to address it. And I found that she kind of guided me through in a lot of ways because you kind of - even if you're reading a flat description of someone's life and their works, you do find bits of their personality starting to come out and I tried to incorporate that. And sometimes there are things that are so resonant that you don't have to do a sort of massive leap to work out how she would have found it or engaged with it because we're still bumping up against so many of the same problems today.

I mean the classic one is her not being able to join the Royal Geological Society for being a woman. And I mean there's still so much institutionalised sexism in the STEM subjects that you kind of go... I mean it's not as sort of brazen as that, but it's not much better in some disciplines. And there was one thing, which was actually post, you know after her death. And it was the plaque that the Royal Geological Society, in a sort of act of contrition, it seems donated to her church after she passed. And basically, it thanked her for her contribution to science but crucially the wording they used it they thanked her for her usefulness rather than any of her actual like, the fact that she was instrumental in... basically they glossed over the fact that she made all these incredible discoveries purely by herself and that she did basically change the landscape of the discipline.



Like you couldn't understate it more if you were trying and that just made me laugh and groan simultaneously when I first read that.

[Extract from Jenet's piece]

JL:

Thou say'st the world has used thee ill
That men of learning sucked thy brains and will
Continue publishing their works
Of which thou furnished contents but the perks
Thou ne'er didst see and never will
For scientists will have their fill
 Of finds they owe to quarrymen
 To nameless workers, on whom they depend
 But when it's one of their own kind, well then...

And so it was that by thirty
Thou wast once more in throes of poverty
A wretched thing a mind so rare
Should e'er be on the cusp of such despair
Because of so intransigent
And unfeeling a thing as pounds and pence
 If consolation thou mayst find
 In that respect all of our greatest minds
 Are even now still victims of the time

Philippa Gregory: This is Philippa Gregory. Margaret of Anjou is probably the original she-wolf, that's what Shakespeare calls her in his history plays. And that's because Margaret of Anjou was of the house of Lancaster and of the Plantagenet House prior to the Tudors. So, Shakespeare is really constructing an argument whereby the Tudors are right to come to the throne of England and Margaret of Anjou is part of the history of the Wars of the Roses. She was the leading Queen on the Red Rose side. Margaret of Anjou I mean is remembered for being the she-wolf but her true story is very much obscured.



As soon as I was asked to do something on the she-wolves, Margaret came to mind immediately, partly because she is in a sense Shakespeare's original she-wolf but also because she's very typical of the way that women are demonised when they are aggressive or brave. The mere fact that one says aggressive of a woman and one doesn't say aggressive of say, Julius Caesar, you know that you assume that men had a war-like nature and that women in a sense have to justify having a war-like nature. She was identified very, very early on in her life as a woman who was both sexually active - though we don't know that she took a lover, she may well have been completely faithful to her husband for all her life - and she was certainly militarily and politically active in that she took the regency when her husband Henry VI simply seemed to... he fell into some sort of coma, he had something like narcolepsy, he literally fell asleep leaving her and her new-born son to try and rule a country which was probably ungovernable. And her response to that... I mean really a courageous response, was to try and take the regency and then to fight for the rights of her son by leading an army, by putting an army together and instructing them to go into battle and some of the battles she was present at.

[Extract from Philippa's piece]

PG:

Call me a she-wolf
You bloody fool
Scared of your own shadow
What's the matter with you?
Yes a woman is darkness
Howling at the moon
But where is your wildness
And the wolf in you

So, William Shakespeare, Ralph Holinshed, Thomas Chaucer, the Venerable Bede. One a man who could not live with his wife; one who married a girl for her fortune; one who left his fortune to his



master for lack of an heiress; and one a celibate who never saw a woman since he said goodbye to his mother at the age of eight. What do you know about women? How dare you tell the history of the nation when you know nothing, nothing about half of us.

I know. I know about the women of England because I am one. I am Marguerite of Anjou. A queen of England, the wife of the King of England, the mother of a Prince of England, a child bride, a beauty, a woman with the courage to ride into a battle I couldn't win, to walk into the Tower of London where they murdered my husband, to spend my life fighting for my son's right to the throne, his right, how does that make me a she-wolf?

[Music plays]

PG: What I was intending to do was what the remit really is which is to write a note to the she-wolf and very, very quickly I was being her, I was sort of personating her. And that's an incredibly enjoyable experience for me with a historical character anyway because you get such insights into someone when you're trying to imagine yourself in their place. Not just going like there you are, I'm imagining you but going like I'm now trying to stand in your shoes. What does the world look like to me when I am you, not when I'm the historian observing you? And that seems to me the big difference in my life between writing history and writing fiction, when I'm trying to embody the characters and it's illuminating as a process and I found it exactly the same for this. The moment I gave myself permission to imagine myself as her, so in a sense my note is from Margaret of Anjou to us.

[Music plays]

Amanda Wilkin: Hi, my name's Amanda Wilkin and the woman that I have been inspired by is called Bessie Coleman. She was the first woman of colour to get her pilot's licence, and she's extraordinary. I had heard about Bessie Coleman's story maybe a couple of years ago, I read about her on the internet. And I remember seeing this black and white photograph of this woman of colour standing on the



wheel of this tiny little aircraft and I was thinking who is that, who is that? And as I delved into it more, I mean first of all I had to research so much on her story.

Bessie Coleman was born in 1892 in Texas, she was born into segregation in a share-cropping family and in 1921, she was living in Chicago, Illinois. And she was painting nails and hearing stories of men coming back from World War One, talking about Europe, and she decided she wanted to be a pilot, she wanted to fly a plane.

[Music plays]

And because no one would train her in the States because she was a woman, because she was black, so she sailed to France to get her pilot's licence there. I love this because she was, she didn't know French so she was painting nails during the day and trying to learn French in her spare time and then you know, sailed to France, got her pilot's licence, came back to the States and was performing because people used to perform in air shows then as a way of making a living. So, loop the loops, nose dives, she came back in 1922 and was performing up and down the United States. And she refused to play for segregated audiences which is what I love. She managed to buy I think two planes, and these would have been old World War One planes, second-hand planes that no-one else would fly she managed to save up and buy and she was performing in these things and giving talks because she wanted to start a school for women of colour to learn how to fly. Bad ass!

[Extract from Amanda's piece]

AW:

Youth.
you don't know yet
girl
listen to me
Bessie
with your thick



curly hair
tied back
with your
dungarees
patches
dusty elbows
gonna get in trouble with that scrape you were told not to climb that
tree
it ain't lady like
it's not
that's right, according to everyone here you've overheard 'she's
chatty, that one' got a lot of attitude
you gonna get into trouble
got to look sharp
dress right
speak well
or they'll have more of a reason,
even more to
put you down.

[Music plays]

IG: One of the wonderful things about this project, as Jess said, was that every one of our writers already had a woman from history who they held close to them, who meant so much to them, and who knew, immediately, they had to write about.

But as well as honouring each woman with a note, coming together as a collective has created new resonances across the centuries. What does it mean to create a new collective of voices, and to give these lost and forgotten women a new home? What does it mean to hear voices ringing across the centuries again? And how does resurrecting the past help us to see our futures more clearly?

JL: I think there's a great propensity in history, you know it is the kind of *raison d'être* of history to erase those that are not in the kind of status quo and aren't in positions of power and the achievements thereof. And so, I think it's incredibly important to find stories like



this and to present them in a kind of collective way because it does bring home just how much history forgets. And you can very easily fall into a trap of thinking that history is gospel. It's so important in terms of examining the world today, certainly as a non-binary transfeminine person, you know, we're so often told we don't exist until this year onwards. But if you look back and you just start to try and pick apart and draw back the veil of all this kind of obfuscatory language that has been used about people who are clearly NB or transfem or trans masc in history. But you do have to do that work! You know? And I have many more learned and intelligent friends than I in the trans community... CN Lester is one who springs to mind who's an activist and opera singer and composer, who just blows my mind with how they can just whip out a name of some famous opera singer who was trans from centuries. Yeah and it's very much about finding your field or your discipline and just going, hang on there were all these people before me, there's no reason why I can't follow in their stead. So, I do think it's very valuable for that reason.

[Music plays]

PG: There's such a range of other women being remembered in these pieces that in a sense I think what we see that the she-wolf tag is... you know, you could just as well call it non-conforming. That when people don't like a woman's activity they label her either sexually misbehaving or unnaturally aggressive or dangerously aggressive. And basically, a woman cannot step out of being the Angel in the Corner in the Victorian phrase without encountering this sort of attack. So, Margaret is very much typical of them in that she is both accused of sexual misconduct and of unwomanly ambition and of being very aggressive, dangerously aggressive. So, in some ways she literally combines these characteristics but she also in a sense embodies the very thing that men are afraid of which is why they use these bestial metaphors. Which is that women have a mind of their own and a will of their own and a body of their own and some women dare to use it.

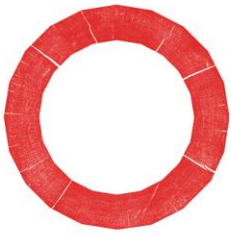


I mean one of the things that I really loathe about modern publishing when it's doing what it thinks is feminism is it says '10 Fantastic Women from History' or '3 Top Women From History'. And you go like, ten? You know we are talking about centuries of women's endeavour and women's achievement and you've found ten and it always starts with Boudicca and it always includes Elizabeth I and you just go... you know, we are talking about a history that has been untold for centuries, there is very, very, very many more than ten and there are very many different ways of achieving and different ways of struggling. And what's so nice about this is that because a very wide range of individual people have chosen to write about the woman that speaks to them, you're completely off the grid of the well-trodden path of the women that we do in our island history chose to acknowledge. Lots of people might know about Moll Cutpurse or Paula Yates, but what they don't know is to celebrate them for the difference that they bring to it. And the stories are apparently completely unlike each other but actually the same thread is there, of someone refusing to conform.

[Music plays]

AW: To tell one on their own makes you feel like only one person did anything inspirational ever in the history of... and it's just not true! You know what we could do this every night of the year with five stories of women who have been forgotten in time or history have told their story in a way that didn't properly elevate what they did, and we'd have enough for years and years and years and years and years and years. So, I think it's important for them to be told as a collective and I hope that people coming to watch it will feel inspired by these stories that maybe they haven't heard of before. But also, the collection of them standing on stage together, being read out together will inspire them to find even more of these stories and yeah, I mean its part of history. Yeah you could do this forever.

This fight for equality, this fight for kindness, this fight for learning about history properly, this fight for compassion for others in treating them the same as human beings, and to elevate those voices that have been lost and that have been... that people have thought oh



no they're not as important. I think sometimes you can feel like your fight at the moment is a fresh one and that no-ones tried to do it before and it's so important to know that the place that we are now couldn't have been possible without us being sat on the shoulders of other people who broke down serious barriers for us. So, it's so important to look to the past, it's so important to find those voices of people who have struggled and have overcome, who have had no reference for what they want to do, and they've had massive ideas and they've done it anyway. Yeah, we have to continually look to the past for answers actually for how, for what is going on right now otherwise it feels like a bigger struggle or an impossible struggle to go 'How can we build on this, how can we go forward?' Yeah.

[Music plays]

PG: I've taken a lot of modern, contemporary statistics about women's oppression and women's violence and had Margaret comment on it, in a sense of have we come far enough for her? I am really sorry to say that the result of now years and years and years of looking at women's lives in the past suggests to me that there is very, very little progress, that that progress is painfully slow and that it is constantly set back. And so, I don't... I mean I do have hope in the future but that's largely because I'm a fairly optimistic person. But what I'm really aware of is that we are not making massive strides and that we sometimes think we have, so you have something like the Me Too movement, and everybody goes like this, you know, heralds a new dawn. And you know a couple of years on, we're not massively further on, I mean I think we've made some progresses but what we see really powerfully is how far there is to go. For instance, if you just look at violence against women or if you look at the inequality of women's wages compared to the average male wages... we've had legislation to forbid domestic violence, to make domestic violence a crime against women for more than a century and two women a week in the UK a week die at the hands of their partners. You know, it's as if that legislation didn't happen. It's as if the police forces don't recognise it as a crime. It's as if when a woman reports violence, her voice is still not heard. And you go, this is the modern world, how can such a thing be? The last



women were paid equal pay to men... 1348. Like we're not even advancing, we're actually, we've not even got back to as good as 1348. So, I think you know something like this, in a sense it's lovely to celebrate the lives of women who have gone before us and it's lovely to celebrate writers who are bringing these characters to life for us. That's really powerful. It's lovely to all be in the room going hurrah! But we've got to take that voice out and we've got to demand our rights.

JL: I suppose it's that there were always willing to break the mould and willing to rail against entrenched attitudes in society. And I feel like that challenge isn't over, and I feel like if you just like be the change you want to be in the world. If you look back at what people did throughout history, history is the business of change. Like change is the only constant. And so, I think it's tremendously encouraging to take your cue from the kind of delinquents of the past and to kind of dismantle authority where it doesn't necessarily warrant being authority.

[Music plays]

IG: You can still catch Notes to the Forgotten She-Wolves in the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse on Tuesday 18 and Wednesday 19 February. To find out more about the writers involved, and to buy tickets, please see our website.

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