

LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

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would like to return to an issue Jim Bulman raised two years ago in his President's letter. He encouraged us to think about how to do more to bring the riches of our profession to the wider audience beyond our classrooms. We complain that freshmen come to us badly prepared by the schools, but we do very little to reach out to those schools to help them do better. Two years later the problem is still with us.

As you may know there is a crisis out there in the schools. Apart from the longstanding problems of crowding, lack of materials and undercompensation, now there are simply not enough teachers. States like my own are rushing to change certification requirements so that a new graduate with a degree in criminal justice can walk into an English class and teach Hamlet. Schools of education and education departments are in an upheaval of self-examination prompted by the crisis and by the resulting competition with quick-fix, for-profit teacher preparation programs.

What does this have to do with us? Most of us are already overwhelmed with work. Even if a Shakespearean is lucky enough to have a manageable class load there are always committees, administrative jobs, and national organizations to attend to, not to mention the research for which she wants somehow to make time. Collectively too we have other responsibilities. Surely then it makes sense to concentrate on what we do best while letting the school professionals do what they do best. This powerful argument prevailed with me for years.

But we are after all in the business of educating students about literature. We have strong and, we believe, useful ideas about what it requires. Besides, no one else is solving the problem. Apart from any moral obligation to our communities, our own self interest is at stake. If nothing changes there will be no students ready for our classes except in a few ivory towers, popular scorn for which will become increasingly justified. For reasons like these the American Council on Education has recently called on college and university presidents to help transform the way teachers are taught and to make teacher preparation more central to their institutions. In other words, to make it more central to us.

What can Shakespeareans do? First, even if we do not wish to get involved in what our university is doing to prepare teachers, we can think more about the potential teachers in our own classes. Although they may constitute only a silent minority, their choice deserves respect. It is sad to realize how frequently would-be teachers hear derogatory remarks about high school teachers or are "praised" by being told that they are smart enough to do something better. Second, we can teach more about teaching—and learning—as well as about Shakespeare. We can increase their awareness of their own reading practices by being explicit about ours. I can explain WHY I chose the plays on the syllabus, their sequence, the questions I ask about them, the kinds of response I ask for, and the kind I discourage. I can even, now and then, ask students to reformulate one of their papers so that it could be presented to a high school class. Needless to say such disciplined attention to their audience and thinking process can benefit all students, not only future teachers. And what if we asked every graduate student to include a section in the dissertation that conveys the essence of its argument in a way that can be understood and appreciated by students and non-professionals?



Third, we can think about the book, *Preparing a Nation's Teachers*, edited by Phyllis Franklin, David Laurence and Elizabeth B. Welles for the MLA (1999). I have learned from it and recommend it highly. Fourth, we can get to know more about the teachers who are already working the schools and might welcome our collaboration. We can talk with them directly and ask how we can help. Finally, the SAA can then work collectively to try to provide such collaboration, through workshops like those we have offered in the past but perhaps also by reaching out in other ways, such as organizing Shakespeareans to run semester long reading groups for teachers in their own communities. Like Jim, I will close by asking those who have ideas about how, or whether, the SAA should address such issues, to contact me (skura@rice.edu; English Department MS-30, Rice University, P.O. Box 1892, Houston, TX 77005-1892).

Meredith Skura