

Letter from Dympna C. Callaghan, January 2013

This is an exciting time in the SAA as we move towards what may be our biggest conference to date in Toronto. Unquestionably, the SAA has grown, having almost doubled in size between 2004 and 2012. The organization now stands at 2,500 members.

This is surely to the good, a sign that Shakespeare scholarship is thriving all over the country, and indeed—since we now have members from no fewer than thirty-six countries—all over the world. There are nonetheless certain logistical challenges inevitably attendant upon the exponential growth of the organization. On the one hand, none of us wants SAA to become a huge, anonymous conference housed in a characterless convention center. On the other, how exactly do we accommodate so many more conference participants in more seminars while retaining the hotel setting with its nooks and crannies for coffee and conversation, not to mention the hotel bar for vital post-seminar discussion? These matters have been under consideration by the Board of Trustees for the past few years, and as a result, the conference now starts a little earlier with an extra group of seminars on Thursday morning. Also, in order to allow a more equitable proportion of the membership the opportunity to deliver a paper in the unique conditions of the SAA before such a sizeable audience of specialists from every level of the profession, there will now be three (rather than the traditional two) concurrent panel sessions on Saturdays. We hope that the new, fairly minor adjustments to the schedule (the Thursday morning seminar session and the extra panels on Saturday) will prove a step in the right direction and will do so without cluttering the schedule or infringing on those equally important moments when like-minded Shakespeareans can get down to brass tacks in conversations outside the public spaces of the seminar and the panel. However, we will only know fully how well this works in practice after the next conference.

In Toronto, Board members will be watching very closely—and listening very carefully—to discover whether the fragile balance of the SAA conference ecosystem has been maintained. Suffice it to say that the Board will re-evaluate and recalibrate wherever necessary, and over the coming years, the Board will continue to look into the matter of how to set the conference schedule with a view to fully and fairly representing the membership and the diversity of members' scholarly interests in both seminars and panel sessions.

While numbers, schedule, logistics and all the tangle of considerations that go into making the SAA a successful conference are indeed of the utmost importance, there is another dimension to all this—a genuine upside. Whatever is the case elsewhere, the much-vaunted imminent demise of the humanities is not evident in the SAA, and for that, I think all of us can be immensely grateful. This is not to say that many members' institutions and careers have not been touched by declining interest in and funding for humanities' research, but it is to say that SAA members remain, in spite of all obstacles, committed to teaching Shakespeare, to educating new generations of general readers, scholars, theatre practitioners, film-makers, poets and writers, and to discovering in their own research projects more about the historical and literary conditions that shaped

Shakespeare's works. In this, Shakespeare Studies and the Shakespeareans who practice it represent a vital line of defense against the erosion of the humanities. What is at stake here is not only Shakespeare's canonical or intrinsic significance (though that should not be underestimated), but also the way in which Shakespeare serves as a portal to a vast range of issues—textual, lyrical, emotional, aesthetic, social, political, cultural, historical (you name it)—that requires a mode of critical reflection that is not bludgeoned by the tyranny of “relevance,” that is, the insistence that literary studies demonstrate its immediate usefulness as a tool for “innovation,” social progress, or economic gain.

However, Shakespeare Studies is, of course, always well able to demonstrate its vital role in contemporary life even as it resists the narrow remit of “relevance,” the limited, overly instrumental understandings of what it means for Shakespeare to remain pertinent. Our members every day make evident how Shakespeare can be used in the classroom to endow our students with skills of self-articulation and enhanced academic acumen, and how Shakespeare in the theatre can become a refraction of issues of the most immediate, urgent importance to communities across the globe.