

Letter from Diana Henderson, January 2014

A Child Is Born.

“Mercy on ’s, a barne! A very pretty barne! A boy or a child, I wonder?”

In 2014, it is a sixteenth-century boy’s birth we celebrate—although perhaps as we do, we recall as well the sister Virginia Woolf created for him: “drawing her life from the lives of the unknown who were her forerunners, as her brother did before her, she will be born.” And others too around the world, whose creativity (and time’s passing) have now allowed collaborations with Shakespeare once unimaginable....

So it begins: the string of associations—seasonal, scriptural, textual, clichéd, intertextual, global—that improbably yet inevitably adhere to any mention of William Shakespeare 450 years after his birth. There will without doubt be bardolatry, festivity, commemoration, conferencing, merchandising, critique, competition (after all, it’s Christopher Marlowe’s 450th too—), exploitation, and exhaustion. But occasions for celebration when marking history don’t arise on a daily basis, at least not for many scholars in the humanities at the present moment, and thus rather than immediately sniffing with distanced superiority—think Maggie Smith as the Dowager Countess of Grantham—we might want to seize our occasion with gusto—think Smith in *Miss Brodie’s Prime*.

Granted, that allusion also recalls the political complexities that arise when we celebrate any document of civilization: specters of Walter Benjamin haunt the memories of “Brodie girls.” And to celebrate with requisite attention to our scholarly and political commitments presents more than a few challenges, which I need not rehearse. The re-birth of the author will not (I hope) be Shakespeare on a half-shell, readied for aestheticized consumption. Nevertheless, for those of us in theater, the sister arts, the academy, and the world who choose to associate with one another, I wish us a year of due respect and wonder for the legacies of a man whose words and theatrical practices speak ever more diversely and imaginatively around the globe. Let us celebrate too our multiple roles in making that happen—humbly, to be sure, but also recognizing our colleagues’ creativity, thoughtful inquiry, probing critique, and extraordinary commitment and passion.

In this year of re-birth, I want to issue a welcoming message to the membership to share with me and my fellow Trustees your thoughts on how we might also help our 21st-century Shakespeare Association of America grow even better. Can we make the SAA more helpful to you in your lives as Shakespeare (& company) scholars, actors, and appreciators all year round—not only, though certainly, during those three-plus days near his birthday when our members share their work and the same hotel space, dance floor, and restaurant tables?

The current leadership has crafted one immediate experiment: we are creating a Call for Proposals space on our new-and-improved SAA website, to help members interested in proposing panels, roundtables, or other presentation formats to find like-minded

participants (and vice-versa). Our hope is that this might be particularly helpful to those in the earlier stages of their careers who may not yet have established networks with colleagues at other institutions; it might also help those working on new material or in a new subfield to join a wider conversation. Panels organized through this new process will be subject to the same deadlines and review process by the Program Committee as any other submissions: for this initial round, then, the time frame is tight indeed. Even so, we hope this experiment might spur some creative thoughts about different formats, and, if successful, might lead us in the direction of some new session models. We also see it as consistent with the SAA's historic commitment to openness and inclusiveness.

The SAA program remains a challenging balance between large communal events (including, therefore, a limited number of formal talks) and more intimate exchanges, including our valued and influential seminars. I am deeply appreciative of those who make the effort to put forth ideas, anchor seminars, and submit papers for consideration. Not all these efforts lead directly to acceptance on the program, and I know how hard it can be to try again after such an experience—but I nonetheless ask you to do so, especially given that the shape of the program and the interests of the membership do shift from year to year. Moreover, with our steadily growing membership, more opportunities continue to emerge—particularly for those who wish to lead a seminar. Seminar leadership has become something of an art form in itself, and I thank those who make the vast majority of these seminars so rewarding.

Our St. Louis conference will also host the first SAA Digital Room as a supplement to our regular program. This is an open space, with projects not subject to review or consideration of the volunteers' other forms of participation in the conference. The membership will be voting with their feet, and I hope will be learning about some of the exciting new ways in which we can indeed create more thoroughgoing year-round networks and collaborations. As we now teach children born in the digital age, is this a harbinger of things to come? Yes, we are also facing challenges as we advocate for love of language and sustained concentration rather than soundbites alone, and some of our cherished practices and values are indeed under fire. But as you meet with things dying, may you also encounter things new-born. Resolve you / For more amazement.

'Tis time.

Awake your faith.