

**Rebecca Bushnell**  
**Address in Vancouver, 3 April 2015**

Good afternoon, all.

This luncheon is a Shakespeare Association of America tradition, and it provides important testimony to the fact that, while our group has grown in size over the years, we can still fit into one, albeit very large, room. We are happy that we can still find some ways we can all gather together in one place, in the plenary sessions and now, if not over cakes and ale, at least over crumble and coffee. The ale can be found at the bar later.

Our gathering together in an affiliation called the Shakespeare Association of America will be the theme of my short remarks this afternoon. The President often begins these remarks with some acknowledgements and then turns to some personal reflections. (I have read many of those of my predecessors, which was probably a bad idea, because they set a precedent for wit and erudition that is hard to match.) Expect more sentiment and perhaps less erudition from me.

So I would like to begin by recognizing all those people who have made this meeting in Vancouver possible and who make the association run throughout the year. I will then share a few thoughts about who we are right now as the Shakespeare Association of America.

A lot of work does indeed go into making these meetings successful, on the part of the SAA staff, the trustees, and the meeting participants. I'd like to begin by thanking the members of the local arrangements committee, Stephen Guy-Bray (the chair) and Vin Nardizzi, who helped make it possible for us to hold the delightful reception we had last night: would they please stand. We simply cannot have such a splendid reception without their work to engage the support of the colleges and universities that are listed in our conference program: so, many thanks to them all, as well.

But let's face it, we can gather together like this once a year because of the great people responsible for running this organization. Making this happen requires strategic thinking, tact, concern for quality and an attention to detail, as well as deep knowledge of the field. For many years now, we have been so fortunate to have the leadership of our esteemed colleague and Executive Director. Lena Cowen Orlin's extraordinary scholarly breadth and great administrative savvy have kept us getting better year by year during times of change: please join me in thanking her once again this year.

Because Lena was in fact on scholarly leave this year at the National Humanities Center, it was even more important that we have such a capable and professional staff to sustain the work of the Association: Joe Navitsky, the SAA Assistant Director, has offered invaluable support throughout the year. Joe, please stand: thanks so much. In the Georgetown office Donna Even-Kesef has provided much needed experience and year-round assistance. But most of all, we are indebted to Bailey Yeager, Senior Programs Manager, who stepped up this year to take on far greater responsibilities in managing the organization. She did so brilliantly and with great equanimity, dealing with everyday issues and also helping us to move forward with new initiatives. Bailey, please stand: on behalf of all of us, thank you so much for all you have done for SAA this year.

But let me now turn to recognize the many contributions of the SAA trustees to keeping our Association strong. Many of you may wonder what the SAA Trustees actually do, but I can assure you that they are working hard throughout the year, along with other SAA members who have generously volunteered to serve the organization. We have a Finance Committee, a Dissertation Prize Committee, a Student Travel Grants Committee, and a Digital Initiatives Committee, as well as a Nominating

Committee and a Program Committee. I would particularly like to mention the members of the last two committees: I would ask them to please stand when I say their names.

The Program Committee that generated this year's stimulating offerings was chaired by Trustee Katherine Rowe and included SAA members Peter Holland, Vin Nardizzi, Curtis Perry, and Lauren Shohet. Thanks so much to them for all their efforts: generating and curating the proposals for our program is a huge job. We are also indebted to the efforts of the Nominating Committee in preparing the excellent slate of candidates for election to the Trustees and for Vice President: this year's nominating committee was chaired by Trustee Doug Bruster, who was joined by SAA members Heidi Brayman Hackel and Adam Zucker (you will hear about the results of the election later from Mario DiGangi).

This year we also convened an ad hoc committee of three former SAA presidents, Bill Carroll (the chair), Dympna Callaghan, and Paul Yachnin, to review the SAA Constitution and make suggestions for changes to bring it up to date with current practices. After discussion by the trustees, all SAA members will have a chance to review and vote on any changes. We are grateful to Bill, Dympna, and Paul for their excellent work and continued service to SAA.

This is also the moment to recognize our outgoing Trustees, who have served the SAA so well and faithfully: they are Doug Bruster and Laurie Shannon (who cannot be here today for family reasons). Thanks so much, Doug and Laurie, for all you have done for us. And many thanks again to Diana Henderson, our terrific immediate Past President, who has really moved the SAA forward with the times, and who was a great guide and inspiration to me during the past year.

This is also the time in our proceedings when we announce the winner of the Leeds Barroll Dissertation prize, named in honor of our distinguished founder. The pool for this year's prize was both wide and deep, but this year one winner emerged with the full acclaim of the committee. That winner is Debapriya Sarkar of Hendrix College, for her dissertation submitted for her Ph.D. at Rutgers University entitled "Possible Knowledge: Forms of Literary and Scientific Thought in Early Modern England." Would Debapriya please come forward? Congratulations!

Here, finally, I would like to thank all of you who contributed so generously to the SAA Annual Fund (including the trustees, who all contributed). Your donations will really make a difference in the SAA's ability to develop new initiatives and to support all of our members. I am sure you are all anxious to know who among these donors won the lottery for the magnificent upgrade to a Fairmont Suite: it was Fran Dolan. Congratulations, Fran! For those of you who did not get a chance to contribute so far this year, you may have missed out on the suite, but there is always time to support SAA.

Now, to my brief general remarks. Today I want to talk, not about the state of Shakespeare studies, nor about the glorious past of the SAA, nor my own not-very-eventful career: I want to talk about you – all of you here today.

Now let's face it, for socially anxious people, a cohort in which I count myself, this luncheon can be a kind of nightmare. Coming through those doors can feel like entering one huge middle school cafeteria at lunchtime. Where am I going to sit? Are there tables reserved for the cool kids? What do I do? Having attended this conference regularly now for some thirty years, I can tell those of you with anxiety that it does get better. However, I have also learned that, while serendipity is nice, and you may meet some fascinating people just by sitting anywhere, it does sometimes help to have a lunch plan.

As I was composing this speech, I began by imagining what it would be like to stand here, on this podium, and to ask: "Who are we?" We are the people who take the time and some pleasure, I believe, in coming together for four days in some attractive place in North America to think and talk about issues

concerning Shakespeare, his contemporaries, his theater and his world. There have been moments when this may have seemed a little strange. When we went to Bermuda, for example, I remember some non-Shakespeareans I know there commenting on what they thought was the odd experience of sharing a plane with hordes of people in dark clothing with their noses deep into books or scribbling on papers on the way to their balmy resort island. They asked, “Who *are* these people anyway?”

As I am sure you are all aware, scholarly conferences like this are rich fodder for satire and caricature. Indeed, our very own meeting has been rather unattractively depicted in a recent mystery novel that shall go unnamed. You all know the stereotypes that haunt such stories: the craven graduate student, “the whining school-boy, with his satchel”; the doddering grand man or woman, who has known the “chimes at midnight”; and the critical stars de jour, “the glass of fashion and the mold of form,” “the observed of all the observers,” all spending tedious hours jockeying for position and droning on and on.

I will not claim we all behave perfectly all the time. I am afraid that sometimes we forget our scholarly manners. For those of you who don’t know what I am talking about, I refer you to a recent column in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* entitled “How Not to Be Jackass at a Scholarly Conference.” Please read these rules carefully. But in general, when it comes to the scholarly stereotypes, as Jack Cade says while dying: “I’d defy them all.”

At SAA we certainly span many scholarly generations, from graduate students to retired faculty who still enjoy being in the game. We all know that advanced graduate students bring much-valued energy and new ideas to our conversations here. The association has long been committed to providing a space for them to share their work and to network with others scholars. This year’s splendid NextGenPlen has provided a new forum to highlight the work of our junior scholars. We also support and recognize graduate students through our program of travel grants and the dissertation prize, and we offer them a healthy breakfast on Friday morning. But, I would also like to note, on the other side of the career scale, that we value the presence of our distinguished retirees at this meeting. Here, even while they are no longer teaching full time, they can connect with friends and former students, provide mentorship, and enrich our panels and seminars with their current scholarship.

And, of course, between graduate school and retirement, you find the rest of us, in a constant welter of work of all kinds. As Diana Henderson wisely reminded us last year, we must welcome here those scholars and teachers who have yet to secure a permanent or full-time position. The SAA is committed to helping these scholars to join in our conversation: I am proud to announce that the Trustees have just approved a new program to provide travel grants for contingent faculty who do not have access to institutional support to attend this conference. This is just one small step in the right direction to address the circumstances that challenge many in academia today.

And, in any case, we are not solely academics. We play many different roles, whether we are employed by a college or not. We are scholars, writers (of novels, even), publishers, programmers, editors, administrators, filmmakers, actors, directors, activists, schoolteachers, and just lovers and followers of Shakespeare, often doing many of these jobs simultaneously. And the structure of the conference recognizes that diversity of activity: we have play readings, performance workshops, a digital salon, book exhibits, workshops for teachers, and films. In this diversity of practice, we remind each other that scholarship and teaching about Shakespeare take multiple forms and extend into the public sphere.

We also come from many places and many different backgrounds. While we are “The Shakespeare Association of America,” you cannot fail to have noticed that there are many people here from countries far beyond North America. Sure, we have gotten used to the Brits in our midst (while not necessarily ceding our subject to them as a birthright). We also see the importance of bringing scholars

from all around the globe into our conversations. Shakespeare looks very different indeed, when viewed through multiple perspectives provided by a global framework.

In the years I have been part of this organization, we have become more diverse, but a look around this room reveals we have not gone far enough to help to bring more scholars of color into our profession. The strength of our field depends on our ability to connect with the experiences of a truly broad and representative cross-section of teachers and students, including people of color. To help move us forward, this year's meeting introduces a new initiative: the Scholars of Color Social, an event to recognize and support our scholars of color in the SAA. Ayanna Thompson and Peter Holland came up with the idea for this event, which has been sponsored this year by Mike Witmore and the Folger Library and several individual SAA donors. Everyone in the room is invited to come to the event on Saturday night, enjoy a glass of wine, and help to network and support our present and future colleagues of color.

With all of this range (and there are many other kinds of diversity) we may find we have plenty to disagree about, but this is not the US Congress. While it's fine that we often disagree – that's how scholarship evolves – I believe most of us know how to listen to each other respectfully, across our personal or methodological differences. Emphasizing a plenary and fewer panel sessions, in addition to the more specialized seminars, the structure of this conference is meant to foster dialogue and the opportunity to learn from others who aren't necessarily our friends.

So, then, who *are* you, anyway? You are people who care about texts, ideas, and questions that may have emerged at a particular moment in the past, in England and the world at a time of marvelous upheaval and conflict, but that also still matter today. I am sure that those of you who teach – and most of us do in one way or another – are in the habit of scribbling on a student's paper, "So what?" "Why should I care?" Why should anyone care about Shakespeare – whatever version of "Shakespeare" we practice? Well, we should all ask that question that every day, no matter what acre of this field we till, as actors, directors, teachers, writers, librarians, publishers, filmmakers, artists, programmers, and others. In her Presidential Address Dymna Callahagn did remind us that the SAA Annual Meeting is a space for us as a break from our everyday teaching, where we don't need to worry about relevance or accessibility and we understand each other: that is so true. At the same time, however, in the end everything that we do is a form of teaching when it communicates the value of the work we do.

And we here are lucky in comparison with many others who teach the works of the past, because we have a hook, and it's called Shakespeare. I am sure many of you have had the experience I have had sitting in a taxi trying to explain to the driver what you do for a living. The easiest way to explain is this: you know, I do "Shakespeare." (I say this unashamedly though in fact I have never published a book with Shakespeare in the title.) Just about every Anglophone cab driver I have ever met around the world has had something to say about Shakespeare (just as they do about Barack Obama). Once the subject is introduced we never seem to run out of topics of conversation. And of course, that goes far beyond the environment of the taxi cab; Shakespeare is just simply everywhere. Previous SAA presidents have wisely indicated the anxiety associated with this easy answer for what we do. Jean Howard noted the "tremendous cultural capital associated with Shakespeare," which can lead to all sorts of amazing reconstructions and distortions, especially in the kind of misappropriations for politics and business that Marge Garber and so many others have detailed. So the bad part is that everyone indeed thinks they know Shakespeare. But it is Shakespeare who lets us get our foot in the door. Once we get that foot in, we can start talking in new ways about poetry, art, theater, ideas, society, sex, politics, history.... The list goes on and on.

So let me leave you today with a great deal of optimism about the future of this Association, and with it, some more tempered optimism about the future of our work in a world that is still stirred by Shakespeare's magnificent plays and poems and the fascinating remains of his time. I know I leave you in

very capable hands with our great Executive Director, the Trustees, and of course my successor, Mario DiGangi. Last year I had the honor of receiving from Diana a tiara that both celebrated Shakespeare's birthday and marked the transition of SAA leadership. This year I would like to continue that practice [*I put the crown on my head*], with a twist, and so I would invite Mario up to the platform for a little ceremony.

Now, with some apologies to William Shakespeare [*Take it off*]:

Rebecca        Here cousin, seize the crown.  
                  On this side my hand, and on that side thine.  
Mario            Are you contented to resign the crown?  
Rebecca        Ay,  
                  [*Take the crown back and put it on my head*]  
                  no, no  
                  [*Pause*]  
                  ay. For I must nothing be;  
                  Therefore no no, for I resign to thee.  
                  Now mark me, how I will undo myself.  
                  I give this heavy weight from off my head.  
                  [*Take off the crown and give it to Mario*]  
                  [*Bow to him*]  
                  God save President Mario, unqueen'd Rebecca says,  
                  And send him many years of sunshine days!

So thank you Mario, for taking this on this heavy responsibility, and many years of sunshine days to you all.