

**Frances E. Dolan**  
**Address in Bermuda, 18 March 2005**

The President's most important task at this lunch is to thank some of the people who help make the conference possible. First, I want to thank you for the generous response to our fundraising campaign, which is slowly but surely helping us to build a nest-egg. I also want to think outgoing trustees Naomi Liebler and Wendy Wall. The committee that planned the program you are participating in and enjoying here was chaired by Wendy Wall and included Lars Engle, Kathryn Schwarz, and Garrett Sullivan. As many of you know, our decisions about where we meet are governed by our ability to get local arrangements committees to help us subsidize the reception. This would not have been easy to do in Bermuda. Because of the long-standing relationship between the SAA and the Fairmont hotel chain, the Fairmont Southampton Hotel underwrote the reception and thus enabled us to come to Bermuda. We are also more than usually grateful to the University of Maryland at Baltimore County. Ken Baldwin, the chair of the English Department at UMBC is joining us here to today. Professor Baldwin made the association a generous gift for this conference since, again, we had no local arrangements committee on which to rely. He and UMBC have also made a long term commitment to the SAA; Professor Baldwin created the arrangement that has made UMBC such a stable and generous home for the SAA. Thank you, Ken, for your support of the SAA. On behalf of the membership, I want to thank the SAA staff. Lena Orlin the Executive Director, Michele Osherow, the Associate Director and acting director this year, and Lee Tydings, the Program Coordinator. Lee is assisted at the conference by Jackie Hopkins and Julie Morris.

Listing all of these people on whom we rely to make the organization and the conference succeed, I'm reminded of how many people feel gratitude and even affection for the SAA. I may have an unusually heightened level of gratitude because I met my partner at the reception in Vancouver in 1991. As a consequence, I experience each year's reception as a kind of anniversary.

Perhaps because I always attend the SAA in a cheery spirit of romantic gratitude and celebration, I decided to use this opportunity to talk about something most of us here have in common—teaching. In particular, I want to attempt to share my sense that the most challenging teaching many of us do also has the potential to be the most rewarding. I refer here to teaching students who are not well-trained advanced majors but rather flounders. Their responses offer illuminating reminders of how the reading process operates. Sometimes, at least for me, this can make it possible to re-experience first contact with Shakespeare's plays; it also makes me think about how and why I read at all.

When I ask my students what reading a Shakespeare play is like they say that it's like starting to watch a hit sitcom after it has been on the air for several seasons; like going to a party where everyone else knows one another and there are a lot of "in" jokes. When you read Shakespeare, they say, you know it's worth it but you're not sure why. There are so many reasons for our students not to read. Plays require readers to do more of the work. I find that some students do not really attend to who is speaking in a play; they just read top to bottom and have a hard time visualizing bodies moving in space, different people speaking. While some like the challenge of making their own imaginary movies, others would much rather watch someone

else's movie instead—although one of my students recently said that if she sees the film version before she reads a play she feels that her imagination has been “incarcerated.” Many students attempt to squeak by on the SparkNotes or CliffNotes summaries. They're used to multi-tasking and multi-media and sitting down to read a difficult play is so oppressively focused, so inward and quiet. Such disincentives are the reason that I think the most basic thing we do has become counter-cultural—everyone in the class reads one play and then we sit in one room and try to talk about it. My students long to surf as they sit there, I suspect. It's a small triumph that they can't. So it's already a pedagogical victory if students have read a play and want to raise their hands and say something about it. For that reason, I *try* to work with what they want to talk about rather than censoring their opening remarks.

What my students want to talk about first is usually characters. Especially when I read their papers I want to remind them that characters are not real people and that they should try to refrain from harsh moral judgments, praise and blame. For instance, the thesis statement in a paper on *Measure for Measure* that I read last week, “Isabella is one judgmental lady,” is not very compelling and the paper that follows from it is predictably grim and itself very judgmental. But I don't want to shut down this mode of engagement because it is where many of my students begin and where I often reside as a reader. One of the pleasures of reading is identifying with and evaluating characters. Why, a student asks with a pained expression, doesn't France stay with Cordelia when she battles for her father's cause? After we discuss that for a little while, I ask her why she thinks that would matter or would help. Well, she says, “When I first met France, I loved him. He says ‘she is herself a dowry’ and I was like ‘yeah, France.’ I kind of wanted to see France again.” I have to like a reading response that is this passionate and especially the way that this student grounded her response in the text, weaving Shakespeare's language and her own together.

In the midst of analyzing the first speech in *Twelfth Night* one student burst out that “Orsino is not a serious dude.” I was a little taken aback by this comment, in part because I find that my students are very busy policers of masculinity and femininity, and they have the capacity to wound one another in that process (as in others). So I asked what isn't serious about Orsino and the student said “Well, he says he's so into, um, Olivia but he's never even with her and he just lies around listening to music and talking to his friends.” Suddenly, I realized that the question is “Who or what is a serious dude”? Some thought and discussion followed. Finally, “Antonio,” he tells me. “He rescues Sebastian, they're together non-stop for three months, he gives him his purse, and he's willing to fight for him. Antonio is a serious dude. If he loves you he means it and he doesn't stop. You can count on Antonio.” Interesting, I say. Moments like these make me glad I bit my tongue and didn't jump in too soon . . . as I often do.

While my own research interests tend to run toward disorder and transgression I've learned that in the classroom it works best to begin with or at least include some discussion of what constitutes order in the world of a play. In *Measure for Measure*, for instance, where is the acceptable, non-transgressive sexuality? Or in this particular discussion of *Twelfth Night*, who is a serious dude? Before students employ a standard, I want them to tell me where they can locate it in the text under discussion. It's also important that they articulate their standards for me because a lot of the time the standards they apply are not what I expect or not ones I share or are not even coherent. How do you know what is normal or acceptable or approved or even

possible? Sometimes this question rebounds on me because I think I know what a plausible answer is for the early modern period. My students are usually guessing, scrambling to piece together information from the text. Their desperate inventiveness forces me to think about why I think I know what I know. I recently interrupted students who were blithely repeating that there is a love triangle in *Twelfth Night*—which many had gotten from a study guide—by asking them who is in it. Who are Orsino and Olivia, for instance, in love with? I thought this was a very good question but no one else did. “Well,” says one student, “It’s not about seeing or knowing one another, exactly. It’s like that reduce, reuse, recycle triangle. It’s about seeing something you already have in a new way, so that you don’t have to get rid of it and replace it. Orsino repurposes Cesario as his bride.”

I’m not promoting a critical approach that you can get off the bottom of a plastic container but this student’s resourcefulness made me think. I often reach for the historical to help me in the project of grounding standards of evaluation—knowing that historical knowledge complicates more than it ever clarifies. For instance, looking at the vocabularies for monitoring sexual infractions in the plays and in defamation suits helps us to speak more precisely about what behaviors were monitored and what ones weren’t. But the result is a pretty messy picture of changing, contested standards of sexual conduct. Students hope that history can resolve all mysteries, but it’s important to disabuse them of this hope. Trying to talk to students about what we know about early modern culture constantly reminds me of my own status as student. I depend on the criticism I encounter at conferences like this one and in my reading to help me in the ongoing process of identifying the assumptions that blind me, the generalizations I make a little too easily or to which I’ve become attached because they are so familiar. To describe this experience of abandoning outmoded knowledge I rely on a line from Shaw’s *Major Barbara*: “You have learnt something. That always feels at first as if you had lost something” (123). We all have our lists of these losses—oh, I have to give that up I guess. We only have to give things up and change our minds if we are paying attention. This is one of the ways in which teaching and research are and must be related. Our knowledge changes constantly. We don’t just transmit a stable body of knowledge because it doesn’t exist. We constantly remake it and we do so in a collaborative way, as the SAA’s seminar structure institutionalizes.

My students are also deeply interested in the plot. While I am often a ruthless and eager reader for the plot, that just isn’t my experience of Shakespeare anymore. My students routinely get me on the ropes with very specific questions about plot. Their questions humiliate me that I skip over some things in the interests of focusing on others. I’m like Desdemona trying to remember the willow song: “Nay, that’s not next.” I often don’t notice just what puzzles them. Sometimes I do this because it is puzzling and I don’t know what to do with it. Many of my students make no such distinction. They see everything as potentially important so they latch on to things I ignore. I take some comfort in Northrop Frye’s claim that “in the direct experience of fiction, continuity is the center of our attention; our later memory, or what I call the possession of it, tends to become discontinuous. . . and regrouped in a new way” (627). What I would add to this is that maybe a professor who has thought about a play a lot might actually sound confused, unprepared, and unhelpful if you asked her about the basic sequence of events precisely because she’s already rearranged it in her head in some really meaningful way. At least I like to think so. Every reader has his or her own map of a play, with different peaks and valleys. If first readers operate on the assumption that everything has an equal claim on their attention this might be why

the least experienced readers are sometimes the most open to offbeat scenes and minor characters, problem plays and late plays, or texts for which we might feel we have to make a case, like homilies, ballads, pamphlets, or legal treatises. No expectations to disappoint, no investment in what we might call literature, no hierarchies to overturn. Whatever.

However I might try to rationalize the gap between what I emphasize and what my students do, it is certainly true that they want to talk about the plot a lot more than I do. In a midterm evaluation one year many students asked that I begin class by reviewing the plot. I attempted this and then quickly tired of it. They have access to so many plot summaries; I don't care that much; and it's very hard to do. In a time-honored teaching trick I turned the tables and asked them to do it. We were on *Othello*. We got off to a very turgid start so I tried to urge them to think like storytellers or screenwriters. "So this guy is denied a promotion . . ." "So this man and woman run away to get married . . ." They made some interesting attempts. Sometimes they started with what was represented in the first scene. Sometimes they started in the backstory. Sometimes they started in another location at the same time—such as with Desdemona and Othello. It was fascinating to talk about the story as a continuum that was reordered in the telling; that you could make the same story more exciting or disturbing or confusing by thinking about what to show and what to describe and when. Of all the ways that this story could begin why start like this? Then one student who had been paging through his book says "so this Egyptian gives a woman a handkerchief." I can't help but intervene "or did a man give his wife a handkerchief"? Some muttering. This is just the kind of thing that will screw you up on the final. "No wait, wait" another student says, "if you're gonna go with this, how about 'some maidens die and their hearts get cooked into mummy.'"

In what became a collaborative game, these students revealed that they understood that objects can be characters, and can have stories of their own. Focusing attention on objects and places often helps struggling students get some traction in or control over the plays. Students uncertain about many details have ready answers to questions like "what props couldn't you do without?" and "where do you first see that purse or that handkerchief" and "where does it go from there? Whose hands does it pass through and why does it move?" As a student recently noticed in tracking gifts in *Twelfth Night*—everyone wants to give stuff to the twins. My point is not that students intuit all of the insights of recent criticism about Renaissance material life but instead that their observations and questions help me recapitulate how and why scholars turned their attention to things. Listening to students talk about their experiences of reading reminds me that critics are all readers and that it is often most effective to introduce critical insights and discussions of method in response to students' observations and questions. It is inevitably also more ad hoc. Not "read this body of critical essays to learn a vocabulary or set of questions." But, "if you're interested in that then maybe you should read this." Many of these suggestions are not pursued, but it's still worth it I think. I try to remind my students that a famous critic asks just that question, or has written a whole essay about the word or phrase or object on which he or she is focusing. The untutored or unedited question has the most in common with the best criticism because eye-opening essays begin when a critic asks a great question or takes a fresh look or notices something strange. In *Hamlet*, the Ghost doesn't appear and isn't mentioned after the closet scene. In *As You Like It*, why is there a wrestler and why does the word "wrestle" appear so many times? I could go on and on. I want students to trust their own instincts. If they think something is interesting or important they are, I think, inevitably right. What they need to

work on is explaining why! I don't require that my students "appreciate" Shakespeare. I sometimes do and sometimes don't and what interests me is often what I find disturbing rather than beautiful. I want them to read it and be willing to engage with it. Period. If students actually wrestle with these plays, then they can see that, in my view, nobody ever ruined anything by looking at it more carefully. Critique is pleasure.

In part because study guides instruct students to keep track of the fates of characters—who marries whom? Who dies and how?—their interests in character and plot conjoin in an acute attention to the endings. What happens to Antonio, that most serious dude, at the end? I certainly have students who are uncritically homophobic, who seem bewildered at the idea that happy endings might have many shapes, who roll their eyes at all of these intimate friendships and cross-dressed girls and ambiguities. In Act 4, scene one of *As You Like It*, when Celia presides over a marriage between Ganymede and Orlando, we see a stage picture that remains a shock to many students and their parents, the kind of thing you might go to the polls just to discourage. In the classroom, it is therefore an occasion not for conversions—I guess, although I can dream—but for conversation about issues that are very much unresolved, that desperately matter. I think that what we do matters. There is no escape from harsh realities, painful choices, and awkward topics. If students hope that Shakespeare will be a safe haven, a respite from race, and gender, and class, from queer studies and ethnic studies and all that jazz, they are sadly mistaken. At least, that's my one real point of honor in my own classes. On standardized course evaluations, maybe we could replace items like "professor shows mastery of the subject" with "professor routinely makes me uncomfortable."

In their responses to the endings, students' identification with characters, and perhaps the homosociality of college living arrangements, can lead them places they don't expect. For instance, at present I have one student whose desire for grand-slam comic endings and vague sense that it is not good that people should be alone leads her to imaginative match making. She comes up to me after class: "Well Antonio could maybe be with Sir Andrew at the end of *Twelfth Night*," she says "Don't you think?" "Hmm." I say. "Andrew might be a come down for Antonio after Sebastian." "And what about Malvolio?" She is ready to imagine a threesome. "Maybe," she responds, "maybe Malvolio wouldn't be so mean if he really felt that they liked him?" "Or Feste?" I ask. She's not that worried about him, she says, because "He doesn't seem as if he wants to be with someone else but the other three all do. He's a loner."

For me, it's important to talk about what I see as the exclusions and subordinations that are part of the operations of Shakespearean comic form without seeming to naturalize them. I don't want to make it too easy for students to conclude that "Oh, Rosalind and Phoebe or Antonio and Sebastian could obviously never be together" in Arden or Illyria or anywhere. Sometimes students who haven't mastered the rules of literary engagement are especially open to experiencing plots as unpredictable and in play—maybe it will turn out differently this time. Anything could happen.

A few years ago, a student asked "What do you think next Christmas will be like for the characters in *Twelfth Night*? It'll be like, 'Hey, remember how you used to work for me but I thought you were a guy, and I thought I loved my sister-in-law here, and I said I was going to kill you, and you seemed to go along with that, and . . .'" "People," I said, "is it just my family? I

can picture that Christmas. But for my family imagine a Christmas, Hannukah, Kwanzaa, Solstice sort of event.” One student in this class had shaved his head and wore only black for several weeks because, he said, “I like Hamlet.” He comes to my rescue. “No,” he says, “I don’t think it’s only you. I for sure had that Thanksgiving.” Another student is very disgusted with both of us and our weird families. “Yeah, like what?” he says, very cranky. “A shipwreck? A lost twin? Falling in love with a man who turns out to actually be a woman—or, you know, whatever?” “OK,” says my goth Hamlet, “Don’t go there. It’s just like—strange . . . histories. But . . . we’re a family as much as anyone; and . . . we eat dinner.” It’s really not that hard to envision these people in act 6. I like to imagine that Orsino sometimes says, “much as I love your maiden’s weeds and everything, why don’t you wear the Cesario outfit tonight?”

Is this a great job or what? Conferences can sometimes promote invidious comparisons. Many, possibly most, of us sometimes fear that perhaps we have one of the *lesser* jobs. Perhaps you always think this; perhaps you thought it during some part of your career or only on really insecure or unhappy days. Perhaps you are not sure what kind of job you might get or you have a new job and you’ve been “reassured” that it’s a good . . . enough . . . job—to start with. Perhaps you have been spared such doubts. There are many reasons that any one of us might feel some regret about our career choices or our name tags, that we might suspect that others elsewhere have it easier or it used to be better. One reason for these feelings is that many of us spend a lot of our time and energy thrashing about with students who are so dispiritingly different from our own student selves—we who were motivated, prepared, and insightful in a recognizable way. Such mini-mes are, of course, delightful, and I am grateful for every one that I encounter. Yet what they have to say is like the news Roderigo and Iago tell Brabantio or King Hamlet’s Ghost tells his son. “There needs no English major come from the library to tell us this.” Their remarks, however re-affirmingly brilliant, are usually less unsettling, funny, and surprising. For that reason, I would like to suggest, when we feel most estranged and at sea in the classroom we have the best jobs, wherever we may be. This is not because struggling students say the darnedst things. But because in their perplexed, frank response to the intimate and amazing encounter that is reading they free us to read all over again, to say, “I hate Portia,” or “this play has always bugged me,” or “When I first met France, I loved him too.” Personally, I hope Andrew and Antonio—and Malvolio—will be really happy.

Let me now introduce the incoming president of the SAA, William Carroll.