

**Linda Woodbridge**  
**Address in Atlanta, 2 April 1993**

In the last Shakespeare Association Bulletin, I invited you to tell me how you create continuity with high school Shakespeare teaching. I had a flood of mail, and I base my remarks today on what you told me.

You wrote much about two annual institutes, one at the Folger and one at Ashland, Oregon, where teachers from across the continent study Shakespeare intensively for four or five weeks. Our own members founded these and are directors of them today; many members have taught in them: Jeanne Roberts, Peggy O'Brien, Russ McDonald, Alan Armstrong, Stephen Booth, Susan Snyder, Thomas Berger, Joan Hartwig, Meredith Skura, Barry Gaines, Lyn Swift, Carol Neely, Ed Berry, Janet Adelman, Sandy Leggett—to name a few. Both institutes involve live performances, and professional actors instruct in teaching through performance; both use master high school teachers to address, as Russ McDonald writes of the Folger program, “problems typically faced by high-school teachers—difficulties with vocabulary, the problem of blank verse, the question of relevance (when bringing in Oprah is useful, when self-defeating).” McDonald says, “It keeps me in touch with what my students are doing before they get to me.” Coppelia Kahn writes of Ashland: “Most of the teachers are intelligent, reasonably well read, venturesome, enthusiastic, and articulate; they are the winners in a nationwide competition.” Many others wrote to tell me about NEH seminars and other grant-funded events; Bernice Kliman of Nassau Community College suggests an SAA workshop to help people apply to direct such seminars. Here’s a quotation from an astute grant application shared with me by Nona Fienberg of Keene State College: “Whenever challenges are raised to the traditional secondary school or college curricula, Shakespeare’s name and works are invoked to suggest what treasures we might lose if we make curricular changes. This seminar proposes to demonstrate that in adapting curricula to increase our students’ awareness of the cultural diversity of our world we do not threaten our study of Shakespeare.” Estella Krantz of Seattle writes of an NEH program that gives outstanding teachers a year’s sabbatical to pursue their studies.

Our own Association runs a workshop for high school teachers at each of its conferences; Sara Jayne Steen, Sharon Beehler, Herb Coursen, Barbara Hodgdon, John Velz, and others have been involved. Several of our members have designed courses on teaching: Mary Maher has a seminar on “Teaching Shakespeare Through Performance to Teachers” at the University of Arizona; Roslyn Knutson at the University of Arkansas is designing a graduate seminar on teaching Shakespeare, for Master of Education students; Ed Rocklin is initiating a course in “The Pedagogy of Dramatic Literature” at California Polytechnic. Several write of enticing high school teachers into undergraduate classes, though teachers sometimes have trouble getting credit for this in their salaries. Nona Fienberg, who teaches many aspiring teachers, is “concerned about the disparity between [such] students’ needs and the ‘pre-graduate school’ format of our course offerings.”

Valerie Wayne at the University of Hawaii has been participating in a program through the state library system, “Classic Teens: A Look at Shakespeare’s Young Heroes and Heroines.” Several actors stage a scene and then, in character, discuss it with an audience of teens. Valerie, as moderator, asks whether, say, Polonius had a right to direct his children’s behaviour—the actor has played Polonius as a “stuffed shirt tyrant,” and this really sparks discussion. In the *Romeo and Juliet* discussion, she reports, “someone from the audience [will] ask Romeo why he so quickly dumped Rosalind for Juliet; Juliet express[es] great surprise at learning of this ‘other woman.’ We worked on our discussion of suicide in that play, because it’s no joke among modern teens. We did not use [the brothel scene] in *Pericles* as an occasion to bash prostitution, but to explore contexts in which one is forced into sex without desiring it.” They distributed a booklet to the audience with articles such as “Four-Hundred-Year-Old Teens,” and “What’s With Virginity?” Over three years, audiences grew from 25 to over 300.

One member who has been both a high school and university Shakespeare teacher, Sharon Beehler, has a cross-appointment, at Montana State University, as an English professor and as Director of English Education in the College of Education. Ed Rocklin is on a year's fully-funded leave to work on a high school curriculum development project funded by the American Council of Learned Societies; he is also completing a book on teaching Shakespeare through performance.

Ed Taft reports that the West Virginia Shakespeare and Renaissance Association is devoting a session at its next conference to high school and college pedagogy and has a panel on "Teaching Shakespeare in High School." He edits a journal which encourages pedagogy papers, and hopes that other journals will follow suit. Herb Coursen has just started a mini-journal, "Shakespeare and the Classroom." In 1990 the *Nebraska English Journal* did a special issue on "Shakespeare in Our High Schools"; among the stimulating articles were two on the use of expurgated Shakespeare texts in high schools. Several contributors advised that the high school old standards be rotated; "It is time to give *Julius Caesar* a rest." (In my own community, though, this is not easily done—local school districts lack the money to change text books.) The narrow range of set texts for Shakespeare in the curriculum—*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and (yes) *Julius Caesar*—has also been the subject of vigorous controversy in Britain, where our colleague Catherine Belsey recently chaired a debate on the topic, made memorable by director Michael Bogdanov's suggestion that Shakespeare be banned from the classroom for 20 years until tempers cooled off.

How good is high school Shakespeare teaching? This matters to us. Bernice Kliman writes, "students turned off by Shakespeare today will not be our students tomorrow." Russ McDonald recalls "a very unfortunate experience with *Julius Caesar* and *As You Like It* in the tenth grade in Houston, Texas, 1964; I thought I'd never get out of the third act of the comedy"; and line-by-line exposition of a play, protracted agonizingly over weeks, seems still to be stupefying students today in many high school classrooms. Kathryn Murphy Anderson, a PhD student teaching at Boston University, writes of the "devaluation of the comic" in high school classes, the heavy concentration on tragedy, and worries that students are "given no opportunity to *enjoy* this material, but merely to 'learn' it." Heather Dubrow of Wisconsin writes that "the quality of high school Shakespeare teaching—like its university equivalent—is tremendously varied." Though much is excellent, we must also do "damage control, responding both to misinformation and loss of enthusiasm because of bad high school classes. [We must] challenge students who have been fed potted and often dated interpretations to rethink them, to realize for example that plays cannot be reduced to the idea of a tragic flaw." A standard feature of the Folger Institute, too, is Russ McDonald's annual lecture "attacking the notion of the tragic flaw."

Coppélia Kahn raises an important issue: "In [poor communities] with many non-English speaking immigrants entering the schools, with economically or culturally disadvantaged students who have very low reading levels and little experience with books of any kind, I'm not convinced that Shakespeare should be taught across the board in the high school curriculum. There are many other fine authors whose language presents less of a barrier." Lucie Germer after 25 years of teaching English as a Second Language in high school took courage, after an NEH workshop, and tried *Macbeth* on her ESL students; she reports that they loved it. "Students had fun acting the parts. The language is, of course, even more difficult for them than it is for American high school students, and in our class sometimes *Macbeth* speaks with a German accent and his wife with a Spanish one." Germer admits, though, that "almost everyone wants to be Banquo's ghost so as to be on stage without having to say the words." Despite such successes, Kahn's question remains: *should* Shakespeare always be taught in high school? "Many students are soured on Shakespeare," she writes, "because, given that they aren't ready for him, their first experience is labored, boring, pointless. How many times have university students said to me, 'I hated Shakespeare in high school but now I love it.' I believe they are so often exasperated and repelled not necessarily because Shakespeare isn't well taught, but because they have far too little preparation for

reading any sort of literature.”

For myself, I wonder if we don't sometimes overemphasize “methods” at the expense of content. My Department sponsored two conferences for high school teachers, heavily emphasizing methods; belatedly, we realized that the teachers were thirsty for knowledge about Shakespeare, the Renaissance, and current critical approaches. They *had* their teaching strategies; they wanted content. On the request of one high school, I gave a lecture on the Renaissance, in which talking at high speed I covered the Reformation, the age of exploration, the printing press, humanism, the rise of the middle classes, marriage theory, perspective in painting, empiricism in science, the rise of the vernacular, urbanization, proto-capitalism, secularization of education, and changes in trade and commerce, in one hour. Startlingly, most of this was news to them: they took notes until their fingers cramped, and invited me back. In the *Nebraska English Journal* I spoke of, John Freeman gamely advises on how to introduce New Historicism to high school classes. I think many high school teachers would welcome this.

In 1991 the Renaissance Society of America had a special session on “Teaching the Renaissance in High School,” which noted that in world history courses the Renaissance competes with up to fifty other units. One panelist cited a world history textbook in which one paragraph was given to the Renaissance; social studies teachers face covering 5000 years of history in one year. Another panelist gave the Renaissance perhaps ten more years in the high school history curriculum. My daughter was taking world history in high school in 1984, and just as they reached the Renaissance she finished the job I had hired her to do—help me proofread my book *Women and the English Renaissance*. Dana is one of those students who, to a teacher's chagrin, participates so fully in discussion that other students cannot speak, and the teacher chose this moment to take her aside and ask her not to say anything in class for at least two weeks. Dana was incensed: “The other students haven't even read the book—they don't *want* to talk!” But she agreed to comply. The next day, the teacher fired his first question: “Who can tell me how women were treated in the Renaissance?” Dana, who felt she knew something about this, bit her tongue. But no one else answered, as she had predicted. The teacher repeated the question. Still no answer. He repeated it a third time. “Who can tell me how women were treated in the Renaissance?” Finally Dana could bear it no longer, and she hissed in a whisper “shittily!” At which the grateful teacher whirled around and said “That's right—with chivalry.”