

Mary Beth Rose

Address in Cleveland, 20 March 1998

A few weeks ago a reporter from the *Wall Street Journal* called with a question. He had heard—somehow it had come to his attention—that a college-level course entitled “Bad Shakespeare” was being taught. “Is it even possible,” he asked, “to use the word ‘bad’ and the word ‘Shakespeare’ in the same line?” He seemed genuinely curious and interested, so I resisted the impulse to make jokes about *Titus Andronicus* and instead replied that the word “bad” seemed to provide a witty parody of decades, generations, even centuries of worshipful, often uncritical, and at the worst unthinking admiration of Shakespeare. Responding in part to the media-generated alarm he echoed about changing university curricula, I assured him that Shakespeare was in no danger of being dethroned. Then I attempted to redefine the issue. I said that my own preference was to avoid terms like “good” and “bad,” which come already laden with so many layers of prejudgment that they are actually conclusions, rather than conceptual tools with which to frame an analysis. What some scholarship of the past twenty-five years or so has been trying to do, among other things, is to examine the Renaissance cultural assumptions embodied in Shakespeare’s complex dramatic representations and to bring those into dialogue with our own assumptions and values. I waxed on a little more about this, wondering: when asked in good faith, why is it so difficult to explain to non-scholars, who often have their own investments in Shakespeare, what it is that we (as teachers and critics of literature) are trying to do? Almost everyone either fighting or witnessing the culture wars agrees that humanities scholars as a group have not done an adequate job of articulating our purposes to the public.

I am not implying that the “public” thinks in simplistic terms that need to be corrected: that would not only be condescending, but also false. In fact the deceptive good and bad dichotomy remains very much a part of the dialogue that takes place within the profession. Valerie Traub, who is visiting in Chicago this year, helped me think of a few Shakespeare-related examples: there are good and bad characters, good and bad productions, good and bad women, good and bad quartos: the list could of course go on. Despite the resilience and even the occasional relevance of these terms, reliance on them tends to inhibit rather than to encourage knowledge. I remember being told with some excitement that there was a production of *Troilus and Cressida* that was noteworthy because it featured a “good” Cressida. But how could a character be judged or responded to as either “good” or “bad” who has at most “a kind of self?” No doubt many of us whose approaches to the Shakespeare text have been skeptical have had the experience of being construed by colleagues as disliking Shakespeare, as being mad at him, as thinking, in other words, that he is somehow “bad.” This construal is not entirely unjust. For many of us who have questioned the authority or stability of the Shakespearean text either in editorial matters, matters of theatrical production, or in matters of cultural ideology, have an engagement with Shakespeare that is deeply ambivalent. In its most creative moments, however, ambivalence generates not accusation, condemnation, or acquittal, but a complex critique. Thus as we have discovered, asking whether or not Shakespeare is sexist, racist, homophobic, politically conservative or subversive and concluding yes, no, or both produces a series of red herrings. Much more interesting and important than asking *whether* is asking about *the ways in which*—for example—political and gender ideologies are deployed in a text or production.

Exploring these issues of representation does not always produce conclusions that we can celebrate; for many of us the results of our explorations can be downright alienating. But as our collective presence at these meetings attests, we remain committed to “Shakespeare,” both in the contained sense of the author and the text, and in the larger sense, with all that it implies about drama, the theater, the movies, England, the Renaissance, the United States, the transmission of culture and—I would argue, perhaps most importantly—about the relationship of the present to the past.

If Shakespeare retains centrality in the classroom and on the stage and the screen it is not simply because of the unique appeal of his genius; or, conversely, because of the reproduction of a thoughtlessly accepted, too-reverent celebration that demands our critique. No doubt both of these approaches to the plays help to keep Shakespeare at the cultural center of concern. Clearly, there are a number of ways to produce and consume Shakespeare, and all kinds of people are engaged in doing both. But what distinctive kinds of insights can scholars offer about a body of work that continues to command such dedicated and—for the humanities—expensive attention?

Perhaps some of you have had, as I have, the experience of enthusiastic conversations with highly literate and interesting non-academic friends in which suddenly you notice an odd gap: they think the discussion is over when you think it has just begun. What is missing is a mutual sense of the way history works, and here I am referring to the fact that humanities scholars are forever weighing and reconsidering the complex and nuanced routes through which the present is connected to the past. Among the reasons that Shakespearean poems and plays remain compelling to many of us is that they dramatize problems about race, sexuality, political life, social structure, gender, and authority that now intensely engage us, and they dramatize them in recognizably modern form—almost at the moment, in fact, when certain issues are just beginning to take shape as conflicts. To be recognizable is not of course to be identical: the plays clarify the differentness of the past while at the same time indicating many ways that knowledge of the Renaissance cultural history in which they participate is inextricably connected to a critical understanding of the present.

Much innovative scholarship of the last two decades or so has contributed to an imaginative reconceptualizing of various aspects of the past. The study of the family and of sexuality present two immediately obvious instances in which scholarship is producing new narratives that strikingly revalue the ruptures and continuities involved in cultural transformation. Underlying much of this work is the assumption that informed social change is possible only with a living, workable knowledge of the past. This dedicated reassessment makes possible the critical process by which a culture evaluates itself. As humanities teachers and scholars we are uniquely equipped to articulate and enable this process. The culture wars are somewhat in abeyance now; still, I choose to see the attack on the humanities not as an indication of their diminishment but an acknowledgment of their power. The debate gives us a chance to do what we’re best at doing; it gives us the chance to explain. Recalling the terms with which I began these remarks, this seems to me a good position to be in; how could it be bad?