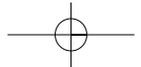
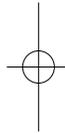
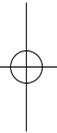


# Part I

# Mentoring



## 1

# Teaching Shakespeare, Mentoring Shakespeareans

*Jean E. Howard*

In an average week during a typical semester, I will spend at least 10 hours in activities related to the mentoring of students, mostly graduate students who hope to make a career teaching Renaissance literature in a college or university. This is one of the most pleasurable, delicate, and complex activities of the many that comprise my life as a Shakespearean. So what is it that we do when we mentor those who will go on to become our professional colleagues and successors? Is it a teachable skill, a highly individual art, or simply a duty? What do we mean by mentoring, anyway? I welcomed Skip Shand's request to think about these issues in print because I realize that though by my own lights I have been an active mentor of graduate students for nearly 30 years, I have not ever formally put to myself the questions I just posed. This essay is therefore an attempt to reflect, in a nonprescriptive way, on my own practice and to invite others to similar reflections. As with so many aspects of academic life, there is much that is deeply intuitive and individual about many of the activities – teaching and research, as well as advising and mentoring – that fill our days. And yet there is sometimes something to be gained from thinking more systematically about aspects of our daily practice. It is in that spirit, then, that I put forward these reflections on mentoring.

Of course, the Shakespearean's first move is typically to think about what Shakespeare's plays offer by way of ruminations on a given topic. Unfortunately, those plays are not a sufficient guide to academic mentoring, any more than to fly fishing. In a few, something resembling a mentoring relationship is portrayed, but usually in a way that shows how

misguided, comic, or irrelevant the mentor can be; or how intractable the mentee. Young women in Shakespeare's plays, for example, are often given the benefit of their elders' wisdom, and usually to bad effect. One can think of the nurse, counseling Juliet to marry the County Paris and forget Romeo since the second match "excels your first; or if it did not, / Your first is dead, or 'twere as good he were / As living hence and you no use of him" (*Romeo and Juliet*, 3.5.223–5).<sup>1</sup> Judging only by expediency, the nurse fails to understand what Juliet really values and so makes herself irrelevant and Juliet hopelessly isolated. Polonius and Laertes, giving advice to Ophelia, do no better, treating her as incapable of independent judgment, turning her into an object into which they pour their maxims and positioning her as a counter in their plots to unravel Hamlet's mystery. A dutiful daughter who heeds the advice she receives, Ophelia eventually goes mad.

In the history plays, older men sometimes give young men the kind of counsel we now associate with mentoring. In *Henry VI, I* and *II* the Duke of Gloucester, assigned the position of Lord Protector to the young Henry VI, tries to teach his charge how to govern wisely. But the Duke's authority is undermined by his wife's treasonous activities, and the young King is in thrall to his French spouse and swayed, by her and a court faction opposed to the Lord Protector's power, to remove Gloucester from office. In this case, good counsel is not enough to rescue a weak man from his own folly and the bad advice of others. The Duke of Gloucester is murdered in his bed, and Henry VI goes on to have a disastrous reign. These examples should all be a warning to those who feel that giving counsel is an easy, automatically efficacious endeavor. The literature on mentoring is full of warnings about mentors who are tone-deaf, inattentive, or smothering, and of mentees who feel, alternatively, neglected or bullied by those positioned to mentor them.

Perhaps the most complex relationship analogous to mentoring that we find in the histories involves Prince Hal, Falstaff, and King Henry. The King is also a father who periodically and without much success tries to teach his son, Hal, how to be a prince and future king. With considerable acuity, the plays devoted to the reign of Henry IV probe the complexities of succession and the psychological barriers that prevent a son from accepting the advice of a father whom he will follow upon the throne. The paradoxical cry, "The King is dead; long live the King," pinpoints the ideology of replication that lies at the heart of the succession process and goes some way to explaining the reasons one so destined might fall out of love with

future greatness even while pursuing it. Is replicating the father all that life has to offer?

Shakespeare, however, allows the recoil from the role of successor to be played out in another arena with another father, Falstaff, who counter-mentors the Prince in the arts of time-wasting and dissipation and seems to chart a course for Hal quite different from that of dutiful successor. As has often been pointed out, however, this particular form of “bad counsel” has some unpredictable results: teaching Hal the common touch and how to “drink with any tinker in his own language” (*I Henry IV*, 2.5.16–17), an art he finds useful at Agincourt as well as in Eastcheap. That Hal ends up as a remarkably successful king, if not always a likable person, seems in the end to owe as much to the lessons in pragmatism he learned directly from his father (i.e., to “busy giddy minds / With foreign quarrels” (*2 Henry IV*, 4.3.341–2) as to those in wit, rhetorical skill, and sheer opportunism he garnered from Falstaff. Mentoring here seems in some sense to pay off, but the collateral costs are huge. Henry IV is harried until the moment of death by his sense that his son is an irresponsible maverick rather than a fit successor. To prove his worthiness, Hal has publicly to humiliate and repudiate the man, Falstaff, who encouraged his wildness and hoped to benefit from it. Both of the older men appear driven by their own needs as much as, if not more than, the needs of the young Prince, and this particular triangle offers a miniature case study of the very complex motives, many of them not selfless, that can plague attempts to prepare young people for the professional roles they will soon assume.

These few examples drawn from the plays are not, of course, truly close approximations of the kind of situation university professors and their students face, but they nonetheless highlight some of the pitfalls that bedevil academic mentoring, and I will return to some of them below. They include the urge to replicate oneself through one’s students; the temptation to stifle independence and creativity by prescribing too closely what a student must do; and the danger of mistaking mentoring for fathering or mothering and so to fall prey to all the psychological traps and hazards that inform parent-child relationships. If distance is a problem, never letting students into the professional game and into our carefully protected reservoirs of knowledge and time, closeness may pose an even greater problem, fostering an inability to distinguish between guidance and cloning.

It is easy to spot pitfalls in mentoring relationships, harder to define a positive model of what might work and be useful. For me it’s helpful to narrow the focus, first, and to look at the very particular situation of

graduate students. What is it that makes mentoring such a crucial aspect of their graduate experience? While we all advise undergraduates about their course work, their majors, and often their life decisions, except in special cases we are not preparing them to enter the profession of which we are members. And they pass through our hands very quickly, often encountered in one or two courses. Untenured faculty also require special kinds of professional advice and mentoring as they come fully to occupy their roles as teacher/scholars and pass through the tenure process, but they are colleagues, not students, with their graduate training behind them. Graduate students, however, are both in close relationship with faculty for a long time, typically five to eight years, and also face an unusually steep learning curve in terms of mastering the professional skills they will need for success as a scholar/teacher at the university level. Above all, of course, they need to reaffirm their decision to acquire a PhD. Not every entering master's student is sure of his or her vocation, and they often need help in figuring out if they have really chosen the right path. If they have, then the array of skills for them to acquire is sometimes dauntingly large. They need to learn how to use specialized tools and skills to do original research; how to write a seminar paper, a conference paper, a dissertation chapter, a grant proposal, a book review, and a job letter; how to study for and pass qualifying exams; how to design a course syllabus and manage a classroom; how to define a dissertation topic they can live with and enjoy for three to four years or longer; how to break that topic into manageable segments; how to assess and write about other scholars' work; how to approach scholars at other schools to read their work or be on their conference panels; how to search for a job; and how to maintain balance between the unceasing demands of teaching and research and other parts of their lives.

All of these are difficult jobs requiring new skills and mental and emotional resources. In the pursuit of them it is easy for students to feel overwhelmed, insecure, and lonely. While most love the literature they have chosen to study, they are in a competitive environment where the love of their subject matter is not enough. They must also pass over many professional hurdles and learn how to channel their passion for literature into a research project that they will pursue, often largely by themselves, for many years. It is an astonishing fact that even in the most successful graduate programs, only 60 percent of entering students complete the PhD. A full quarter of those completing the MPhil never make it to the PhD (Damrosch 1995: 144, 146), confirming my own sense that as one researcher has put

it, the biggest challenge of graduate mentoring involves “helping students make a successful transition from the familiar and highly structured world of coursework, with its short-term goals and predictable closure, to the unfamiliar, loosely structured, and relatively open-ended world of thesis or dissertation research” (King n. d.: 7). This open-ended world is the one in which they will live as professional teachers/scholars but for which we do not always adequately prepare them.

Mentoring is integral to the successful negotiation of this long process of training and supporting young scholars to become full members of the professoriate or, very occasionally, to find a better path for themselves outside the academy. Almost no one learns all the requisite professional tasks and skills without a lot of help from experienced faculty members. At Columbia students get quite a bit of institutional help learning how to become good teachers. There is, for example, a mandatory seminar in the second year that prepares them to teach their own section of University Writing in the third year in the program. Besides the content of the writing course, students learn about syllabus and assignment design, classroom management, assigning grades, responding to papers, and handling controversial and sensitive topics that arise in the classroom. There are many different ways to handle the training of graduate students as classroom teachers, but departments need to have developed one. Individual faculty can help by visiting their graduate students’ classrooms, when asked, to give feedback on their effectiveness as teachers; and, when they are assigned teaching assistants for lecture classes, they can spend time with those graduate students on how to grade papers, handle classroom discussion, and even do lectures. Typically, I give my TAs a chance to give one lecture per term. Sometimes I help them figure out how they will focus the lecture and how they will open up their presentations to invite student participation. We also talk about how to handle certain recurring situations: the question that is met with deafening silence, the undergrad who won’t stop talking, the “back row phenomenon” by which some students opt out of active participation in the class.

My personal goal is to help grad students emerge from this period of intensive training in research and in teaching with their intellectual independence and critical spirit intact, but with their professional naivety dispelled. That is, I want them well-schooled in the ways of the profession, and I want them to feel empowered by that knowledge to try for the jobs best suited to their ambitions, the fellowships most likely to further their research, and the professional contacts most likely to make them smarter.

But I also hope that becoming professional, which it is my job to help effect, does not entail a diminution of the passions that drove them to graduate school in the first place or the independence of mind that will make their work, in the last analysis, consequential. I like students who are always a little wild, the ones never entirely tamed to the merely professional, but who inhabit that space with their own special grace and integrity.

In helping students make it through graduate school intact and well-prepared for the profession they are entering, a little distance on my part is important. Overinvestment makes everything harder: it makes it harder to stand back and be genuinely critical of imperfect work, harder to avoid inappropriately shaping an emerging project, harder to send students off to get advice from someone besides myself. This is a particular challenge when dealing with those students for whom one often feels the greatest empathy: those not to the manor born, those from working-class backgrounds whose parents perhaps did not go to college, or those from ethnic or racial groups traditionally underrepresented in American higher education. Academically gifted, they nonetheless have to work harder than some other students to feel at home and empowered in PhD programs, partly because they may not see themselves reflected in the demographics of the senior faculty. It is imperative to be responsive to the particular situation of such students, yet not to get overinvested in their struggles. I have thought a lot about what graduate students are not: they are not my children; neither are they, I hope, my disciples or clones, because if they are, they have surrendered, and I have demanded, too much; nor are they my colleagues, not yet, though in time that is possible. Rather, I find it most useful to think of graduate students as apprentices learning the skills of a particular craft. I have a lot to teach them, but as in all good craft work, the final product is the result both of collectively generated and transmitted skill and of individual sensibility, taste, and ability.

Consequently, the mentoring relationship can't be all top-down and hierarchical, no matter how much I have skills to impart and experience to transmit. I have to hear as well as talk in order to be able to tease out from students the commitments and intuitions and insights that will be the decisive factors in their projects. I have never been able to figure out how one "gives" students dissertation topics, or why that would be a good idea if one is really preparing them for the open-ended world in which the content of their research is the one thing for which they bear ultimate responsibility. I see my role as helping to shape a project, to suggest materials that might refigure it, to probe the theoretical suppositions that propel it, and

certainly to call attention to others whose work must be addressed. But “giving” someone a project seems to run counter to the ultimate aim of graduate training, which is not just to produce a PhD, but to prepare an individual to be a self-reliant, confident member of the profession. Sometimes the smartest students, the ones with the most ideas, have the most trouble settling into a dissertation. I have seen outstanding students try on three projects before settling on a final one, sometimes only after devoting some months to research and writing on one topic before abandoning it for a better choice. It’s not pretty to watch, but sometimes it is the only way for a really lively mind to settle into its groove.

What then, specifically, can a mentor give to a graduate student? Hands down, the key thing is time. It is the best gift a mentor can give, and while there have to be limits to how many hours a professor gives to his or her graduate students, there is almost no way students can learn their craft from you if you are not regularly available to them. Craft work is exacting and time-consuming, and there aren’t a lot of shortcuts. Sometimes you just have to sit in your office and hear a student out – listen to their half-formed ideas and try to coax out fuller ones or attend to their anxieties about the job market and give them help in preparing a first-rate dossier. As a standard part of my graduate teaching, I use graduate classes not only to teach a particular subject, but also to teach particular professional skills students will need as their careers advance. I invite them, for example, to give seminar presentations in the form of a 20-minute conference paper where the task is to learn how to deliver something orally that does not have to be read to be absorbed, and that can simultaneously engage an audience and convey an argument. This is an extremely hard task since many students wrongly think that being professional means being hard to understand. It’s a perception that is unlearned only with difficulty.

Alternatively, I sometimes have graduate students write 1,000-word book reviews of major new publications in the field, teaching them how to define a book’s central arguments and then to assess the most important of those arguments with tact and precision. It is a perfect occasion to talk not only about good new work in the field, but also about the ethics of critique. Again, students often think that criticizing everything is a sign of scholarly maturity. Critique they quickly learn how to do. What’s harder is to help them figure out how to identify the positive good in an argument or a methodology and to criticize work with generosity as well as rigor. Over time graduate students can certainly learn how to do these common professional tasks better, and with more self-confidence, but not

without trying them repeatedly and not without feedback and commentary from fellow students and from their professors.

However, the biggest demands on professors' time occur when classes are behind students. PhD exams, whether written or oral, provide a crucial opportunity for students to consolidate their knowledge of a field and to explore what might be possible dissertation topics. The exam itself is often something of an anticlimax. At Columbia it involves a two-hour oral exam in front of four examiners, and students often feel that the exam itself touches on about one 20th of what they know and are eager to discuss. Much of the real learning occurs in the work leading up to the exam, not in the actual moment of testing. Studying for orals can be a particularly lonely period, however, and meeting with students regularly during that time can both alleviate their sense of isolation and also provide wonderful opportunities to find out what really interests them about the material they are reading and how it might shape up into a dissertation project. Typically, I will meet with students from three to six times in advance of the oral exam, usually in blocks of an hour or more. It is a lot of time to commit, but it is a setting in which a real working relationship between student and professor can develop and where the faculty mentor can begin to let students take the lead in defining what is important and interesting to them in the material they are discussing together. Sometimes these are learning experiences for professors as well, especially if students want to address material that is off the beaten path. A student offering a field in Renaissance drama will seldom present me with more than a few texts I have not already read, but a field in Renaissance anatomies or travel books can be more of a challenge. One of the reasons to work with graduate students, however, is that they lead you down new paths. It would be impossible to say how much my own work has benefited over the years from the stimulation that comes from students wanting me to do a list with them on books I have not read before or wanting to do dissertations at one remove from my own central areas of expertise.

When students are actually writing the dissertation, the cycle of drafting and redrafting begins, each step in the process providing the mentor with a crucial opportunity to help students learn how to build and shape an argument. Sometimes chapters have to be rewritten three or four times before they click into their final shapes. The first chapter is typically the hardest because students inevitably try to put all the ideas they have for the whole dissertation into their first 50-page draft chapter. Winnowing out the debris, refining the central argument, staging ideas in sequence,

interweaving literary readings with historical or philosophical or scientific material – these are all tasks that are hard to master, even for students who are very smart and who can write well. There is no way to learn them except to try them, again and again, repeatedly garnering feedback along the way.

I can't say often enough, then, that mentoring above all means giving time to students. Giving time to them is the only way they can benefit from the experience each of us has garnered as a member of the profession, whether we are sharing knowledge about teaching or publishing articles or finishing a long writing task, like a dissertation. But for me good mentoring also involves giving a certain *kind* of attention to the students who opt to work with you and be mentored by you. It means, in part, that you are honest in your responses to their work and their concerns. If a piece of work isn't good enough, at least not yet, the student needs to be told – not brutally, but straightforwardly. It's a cliché that criticism is a mark of respect, but it's one cliché that is true.

It's also important to have respect for their difference, which is perhaps the hardest part of mentoring, since the temptation to make a graduate student into a "mini-me" is seductive. Sometimes it's egotism, and sometimes pure impatience, that impels mentors to impose too many of their ideas on grad students, especially in the early stages of finding a dissertation topic and working it up into a serviceable form. It often takes a very long time for things to cohere, and sometimes the process just can't be rushed as students have to do more research, revise what they thought in light of what they discover, and so forth. Keats thought that "negative capability," the ability to be "in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact and reason" (Keats 1959: 261), was Shakespeare's defining characteristic. I think it is also a defining characteristic of many good mentors. They have to be capable of tolerating intellectual uncertainty on the part of their students because it is only by living through that uncertainty that students will find a meaningful path beyond it. This doesn't, of course, mean taking an entirely hands-off approach or letting students flounder; it does mean not rushing them to premature or unearned closure or to the closure you've already decided upon. It is always hard to discover that in the end you disagree with your own student's arguments, but that has certainly been true for some of my most lively mentees. Teach them what we will, in the end their work has to be their own.

Although graduate students are all highly individual and different from one another, working with them falls into fairly predictable stages, and the mentoring role changes from stage to stage, even though at each stage it

requires lots of time, honesty, and mindfulness about the independence of the student with whom one is working.<sup>2</sup> At first mentoring centers on the acquisition of particular skills (both teaching and research skills), then on the more complex tasks of finding and developing the dissertation topic and sustaining an energetic argument over several hundred pages, and finally, with an intense burst of work, on the actual process of getting a job. The second phase is the really hard one where it is easy for mentees to drift away into isolation and depression before the enormity of the task they face. By contrast, the final burst of work around the job process can be a fairly manic one, with materials being written and revised at breakneck speed, adrenaline pumping.

At Columbia, the department has introduced two important innovations to make it easier for students to make it through the crucial dissertation-writing phase of their work. These innovations also collectivize the mentoring function about which I have been writing in very important ways. As my colleague David Damrosch has argued, parts of a graduate student's experience are extremely isolating (Damrosch 1995: 140–85). People often work alone when preparing for orals or writing their dissertation. While some thrive on this regime, others do not. A good mentor who keeps in close contact with the student can counteract the sense of isolation, but there are other mechanisms that can make this phase of graduate work more collaborative and provide the student with more than one mentor. At Columbia we have dissertation seminars for various fields. Our early modern seminar meets in the evening, usually every two weeks, and all the students in the field are members, with a special focus on those who have passed their qualifying exams and embarked on a dissertation. All faculty in the field are encouraged to come to the seminar at which advanced students present their dissertation prospectuses, major conference papers, their job talks, and, above all, their dissertation chapters. The seminar has various functions. First, it keeps all the advanced students in touch with one another and with the faculty. Wine and sandwiches are mandatory. Second, it gives students a rough timetable for producing work, as each student is expected to produce a piece of writing for the seminar every term. Third, it provides the students with a chance to vet their work before a number of people so that they get various responses on what is most valuable and convincing in their arguments and how to improve everything from the prose style to the organization to content. Fourth, it gets students used to public discussion and defense of their work, so that when they go on job interviews they can talk about their dissertations with confidence.

Of course, the primary mentors of the students who present their work in the seminar also meet with them after the session to debrief and to help them winnow and organize the feedback they received. The seminar doesn't replace the dissertation committee, but it augments its work in useful ways and provides students with a collegial context in which to try out their ideas. An unintended effect is often to "cool down" the relationship with the primary mentor, letting fresh winds into the conversation that has been developing for several years around the dissertation, mitigating some of the tendencies toward overinvestment that are so easy for a dissertation mentor to indulge.

Another practice, newly instituted, is to have one of the department secretaries schedule a formal meeting between the graduate student and his or her three-person dissertation committee within a month of the student's submitting a fresh dissertation chapter. In part, the practice is aimed at being sure that students have timely responses to their work and that all three members of the dissertation team are active. But the effect has been, again, to let students take part in a four-way conversation about their work that opens up the range of possible responses to it. At the end of the meeting, all four participants agree on a plan for going forward.

These innovations seem important to me, not because they replace the work of primary mentors, but because they offer students a fuller range of responses to their work and take some of the pressure off that highly complex relationship. If we want our students eventually to be the kind of independent colleagues we most value, lessons in letting go are part of what the mentor has to learn.

There is, then, a particular complexity and delicacy to the mentoring relationship between a faculty member and a graduate student. It is easy to get it wrong and no certainty that even if it is approached with intelligence and good will the result will be a student who loves the profession and goes on to be a productive scholar and teacher at a school suited to his or her talents and interests. There are no guarantees on the mentor's considerable investments of time and energy and caring; and the academic job market is, as we all know, fickle and unforgiving. What we can do is give it our best shot and really pay thoughtful attention to the apprentice teachers and scholars who come into our orbit. If they go on to succeed in the profession and to become friends and colleagues, that is a sweet outcome. But even if they do not, it is a very special part of academic life to have worked with them and to have guided them as well as we possibly could.

### Notes

- 1 All quotations from Shakespeare's plays are taken from Greenblatt et al. (1997).
- 2 There is even a literature on the stages of mentoring, with one researcher talking about the passage from the "initiation phase" to the "cultivation phase" to the "separation phase" to the "redefinition phase," when mentorship ends and a collegial friendship can emerge. See Johnson (2003: 139).

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