

LITERARY BIOGRAPHY

Ben Ross Schneider, Jr.
Professor of English Emeritus
Lawrence University
Appleton, Wisconsin

Ph.D. Dissertation

In 1950, I did my research for my Ph.D. on William Wordsworth at St. John's College, Cambridge University, where Wordsworth had been an undergraduate. That year I wrote an article for the St. John's magazine, *The Eagle*, entitled, "Wordsworth Portraits: A Biographical Catalogue." Decades later, a British Wordsworth scholar published it as a book.

My dissertation, *Wordsworth's Cambridge Education*, was published by Cambridge University Press in 1957, even though it was only a dissertation. Much to my surprise, Cambridge University Press decided to re-publish it in paperback in 2008.

Learning to Teach and the Socratic Method

After several years of teaching English at the University of Colorado in Boulder and Oregon State College in Corvallis, I was hired, in 1954, by Lawrence University, a 700-student liberal arts college in Appleton, Wisconsin, where I remained until I retired in 1983.

Lawrence based its course of studies on a core course for entering freshmen, called "Freshman Studies". The books in Freshman Studies included books like Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Thoreau's *Walden*, Plato's *Republic*, a play by Shakespeare, Paul Tillich's writing on ultimate concerns, Karl Marx's *Communist Manifesto*, and Einstein's theory of relativity. almost all members of the university taught Freshman Studies at one time or another, not just English Department faculty.

I learned a great deal from teaching Plato's *Republic*, which traditionally introduced the whole Freshman Studies course. Plato uses Socrates to expound his ideas. The method involves asking questions rather than providing information as irrefutable fact. The questions require the students to think for themselves and process the information so that they have learned it better than if they had merely been told. The Socratic method also taught me a lot about learning as well as teaching. It has influenced my thinking throughout my career.

Socrates writes his defense of his method in his *Apology*, which he wrote in his final hours. In this work, he describes his refusal to recant his principles and dismiss his followers. He would rather die than stop. He drinks hemlock and dies. He thus becomes a martyr to the Socratic method.

I also taught Sophomore Literature I, which included Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, Shakespeare's plays, and Swift's works, and Sophomore Literature II which began with Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and also covered Wordsworth's poems and theories, Coleridge's works and rules for criticism, Byron's satires, and Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*.

Because Lawrence University was small, teachers in the English Department had to teach each other's courses to cover for sabbaticals. That way, I got to teach the comprehensive Shakespeare course and Major American Writers. I also taught a course in literary analysis in which we surveyed ways of presenting, analyzing and interpreting literary works.

During the early years of my career at Lawrence, Herbert Tjossem, a colleague in the English Department, and I co-wrote and published *Themes and Research Papers*, Macmillan 1961.

18th Century Drama and the Use of Computers in Literature

In the academic year 1964-65, I took my sabbatical in London, England and began to attend meetings of the Society for Theatre Research because I thought I had a means of determining an actress's line. By an actress's line, I mean a role or character type that an actress would play consistently throughout her career. Scholars made remarks about actress's lines in subjective terms, but I thought I prove more definitively that certain actresses specialized in specific roles by doing a statistical analysis of data from the recently published *London Stage 1660-1800*. This 11-volume work pulled together more data about casting than had ever been assembled in one place before.

During this sabbatical, I designed computer software to study the roles of key actresses in 83 plays which were very popular between 1660 and 1730. The publications which were based on this research were "The Coquette-Prude as an Actress's Line in Restoration Comedy," *Theatre Notebook* 1968, and *The Ethos of Restoration Comedy*, Illinois University Press 1971. The first article was about a specific actress's line. The *Ethos* examined the moral teaching in 83 plays based on specific roles that appeared over and over again in the plays. The roles showed that the plays had a moral message.

This was before any computers were available to process text. The research necessitated punching cards to make computer analysis possible. I had concluded that the plays were ethically designed. Although there were some rakes, many of the most high-flying young men had morals. I marked all the characters in all the plays according to their characteristics and then I used the card sorting computer analysis to generalize about the characteristics of particular roles. Then, I was able to label the characters as being good or bad.

My interest and experience in using computers to analyze the wealth of data in *The London Stage 1660-1800* led to my next big project. In 1969, I became principal investigator on a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. There was no index to the *London Stage* and the publishers wanted one. I said I would get it for them. Since the source document was only available in print, this involved capturing the text by typing it again in the form of cast lists so that every role and player could be identified in the index and recognized by scanning the re-typed text. This was many years before the technology of scanning and searching text - which is

familiar to everyone today - was invented. The project took nine years and one more sabbatical to complete. It also required supplemental support from a grant from the American Council of Learned Societies. The *Index to the London Stage 1660-1800* was finally published by the Southern Illinois University Press in 1978.

An offshoot of this computer work was the publication two books: *Travels in Computerland: or incompatibilities and interfaces* (Addison-Wesley 1974) which recounted the typing and scanning of materials for the *Index*, and *My Personal Computer and Other Family Crises* (Macmillan 1984) telling about my adventures with early personal computers.

Using the Computer for Literary Studies and the Birth of www.stoics.com

In the 1980s, I pondered the use of the computer as an aid to literary studies, following up on my use of the computer to count IBM cards for the *Ethos of Restoration Comedy*. By this time, I had developed a strong interest in influential books of the Renaissance. By making indexes to passages of interest from these works, I learned more about the works and hoped that the indexes might be useful to other scholars. For example, Montaigne emphasizes the idea of plain dealing 58 times in his *Essays*. It is the main emphasis of his preface, in which he tells the reader that the reader is probably not capable of understanding his meaning and should therefore not try.

In fact, these indexes seemed to me to be so useful that I built a Web site out of my indexing of books that helped me understand the Renaissance. Twenty-three volumes – Cicero, Seneca, Erasmus, Castiglione, Montaigne, etc. - now appear on the Web site which I called www.stoics.com

The Discovery of Ruth Kelso's Bibliography and its Importance in Understanding Shakespeare

In preparation for writing *The Influence of Stoicism on William Shakespeare: His Background of Reading and How It Shaped His Portrayal of Characters* (The Edwin Mellen Press 2014), I have also indexed a very relevant bibliography of Renaissance literature written by Ruth Kelso, entitled, *The Doctrine of the English Gentleman in the 16th Century*. This bibliography was published in 1929 but has, to my knowledge, been ignored by Shakespeare scholars. Each entry in Kelso's bibliography attempts to describe in the simplest possible terms the contents of the book. Anyone who attempts to study Shakespeare with no knowledge of this bibliography is flying blind.