At the first conference of humanities institute directors I ever attended, held at Irvine in 1988, Bliss Carnochan of Stanford gave an amusing account of the humanities institute as “the play within the play.” Twenty-three years and two directorships later, I thought it might be instructive to return to that idea. Although dramas and operas from many periods and cultures incorporate smaller dramatic performances, the example that springs to our minds is the play staged by Hamlet, who is a prototypical humanities scholar: learned, obsessed with language, ironic, bitter, ineffectual, and certain that he has been deprived of his rightful throne. “The play’s the thing,” he says, “with which to catch the conscience of the King,” and we can usefully begin by considering the identity of the kings (and queens) whose consciences we hope to catch. They are not usually murderers like Hamlet’s uncle, but they are increasingly colleagues with little experience of the humanities. Not many decades ago, numerous distinguished university presidents rose to their eminence from positions in humanities departments: one thinks of Robert Goheen, Hannah Gray, or Bart Giamatti. Nowadays, boards of trustees appear to believe that the budget of a modern research university is far too complex to entrust to someone trained in philosophy, and can only be managed by a scientist or a lawyer. I now report to a political scientist dean, an earth scientist provost, and a chemical engineer president, and I believe my situation is typical.

The increasing hegemony of science in central administrations should not surprise us. In 1959, C. P. Snow warned us that the university was dividing into “two cultures,” and his voice was prophetic. Scientists and humanists today operate under radically different working conditions, and the “science model” has become increasingly normative for the modern university. As colleagues steeped in the scientific assumptions of one of Snow’s cultures claim a disproportionate share of top leadership positions, those of us representing the other culture should soberly consider the consequences of that shift, and develop effective ways of educating our leaders. I shall argue today that interdisciplinary humanities institutes are well positioned to do just that.

The most obvious difference between the two cultures is a radical inequity in resources. The so-called “setup costs” for a new assistant professor of chemistry are higher than the salaries of the most senior humanities professors, and we measure the value of scientists by the federal and corporate grants they bring to the university, which rakes off a large “overhead” figure that is now a critical component of its overall budget. Humanities scholars do not bring in such grants, nor do we require expensive laboratories or equipment; we cheerfully share libraries and rejoice when electronic databases make it cheaper for us to pursue rare materials. Yet cheap as we are, the lack of support for our work is appalling. The federal government spends 245 dollars on scientific research for every dollar it spends on humanities research, and the small budget of the National Endowment for the Humanities has frequently been a target for proposed reductions, as it is at present. In a study undertaken by the American Council of Learned Societies, the late John D’Arms showed that there was less money available for humanities research in the 1990s than there had been in the 1970s— even without correcting for inflation—and the ensuing decades have seen the problem grow worse. With the exit of the Carnegie Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation from the already meager list of agencies supporting humanities research, there are only three remaining sources: the National Endowment for the Humanities, the
American Council of Learned Societies, and the Guggenheim Foundation. An individual scholar’s chance of success in these competitions is severely limited: in the last round, the NEH funded only 7% of those applying, and similarly low “hit-rates” obtain in the cases of the other agencies.

The 300 members of the Consortium of Humanities Research Centers and Institutes owe their existence to this deplorable situation. Starting in the 1970s, many public and private research universities founded humanities research centers or institutes as a local remedy for the inadequacy of national resources. The leading institutes—Stanford, Michigan, Chapel Hill, and several others—support significant numbers of local faculty chosen in annual competitions, while sponsoring frequent stimulating intellectual events. Some have extensive programs supporting visiting scholars; some offer post-doctoral fellowships; many include advanced graduate students among their fellows. In almost all cases, however, the core program is the provision of time released from teaching to junior and senior faculty pursuing serious research projects.

In presenting our institutes to our kings and queens, we face a challenge for which our training in the humanities has actually given us good preparation. We need to be grateful to the visionary deans, provosts, and presidents who supported the founding of our institutes, and who in many cases steered the efforts of development officers toward raising endowments to keep us in business. But we cannot let our continued existence entirely salve the conscience of the current king or queen. We need to find effective philosophical arguments, literary styles, musical and artistic expressions that will also remind our royalty of the significance of what we do. John Dryden, a poet I have studied for many years, would have enjoyed this task, as he had a deep understanding of how to use panegyric to “exhort to virtue under the pretext of praise.” Thanking our current presidents for supporting institutes they did not found will encourage their continued attention, and the alternative, placing ourselves in an adversarial position vis-à-vis the technocrats, is a losing proposition. We need instead to draw them into our discourse, to teach them our language, to dramatize for them the excitement we feel in our work. The modern humanities institute, despite its lack of a tenured faculty, is actually in a good position to advocate for the humanities as a whole. Modern provosts and presidents are over-scheduled. An affable engineer who was president of the University of Michigan in the 1990s told me that he was normally scheduled for 20 of the 21 meals in each week: after breakfast with the Grand Rapids football boosters, lunch at the annual physics conference, and dinner with the automotive engineers (multiply all that by seven), he was allowed to have Sunday night supper with his wife. Facing that kind of life, a modern president is unlikely to make frequent visits to nine or ten different humanities departments. But he or she can often be persuaded to come to an interesting program at the humanities institute, where engaging scholars from a variety of disciplines will be on display. Like the play within the play, which typically illustrates the core concerns of the larger drama in a compact and allegorical form, the humanities institute can give presidents, provosts, or trustees a rich and thought-provoking sample of kinds of work they might otherwise ignore.

Once we have the attention of our leaders, we will be in a better position to remind them of some important differences between the two cultures. For our colleagues in the sciences, new knowledge normally corrects or replaces old knowledge. If a physicist develops, tests, and publishes a new way to measure the movements of atoms or planets, no one goes on using the old method. In the humanities, by contrast, our knowledge base goes on expanding. If a modern English department develops a course in the poetry of Derek Walcott, it should not do so by eliminating its course on Chaucer—yet that is precisely what some scientific presidents and
provosts expect us to do. The head librarian at my university recently told me that the severe limits placed on his space and budget require him to take one book off the shelves for every new book he puts onto the shelves. When I heard that, I was prepared to revise my claim that modern university administrators are not normally murderers, for I thought, of course, of this powerful passage from Milton’s *Areopagitica*:

> Who kills a man kills a reasonable creature, God’s image—but he who destroys a good book, kills reason itself, kills the image of God, as it were in the eye. Many a man lives a burden to the earth, but a good book is the precious lifeblood of a master spirit, embalmed and treasured up on purpose to a life beyond life. 'Tis true, no age can restore a life whereof perhaps there is no great loss, and revolutions of ages do not oft recover the loss of a rejected truth, for the want of which whole nations fare the worse.

When we impose the science model on the humanities, insisting that old ideas must be cleared away to make room for new ones, we increase the likelihood that we will be unable to “recover the loss of a rejected truth.” I would therefore want my play within the play to include the work of classicists and other humanists concerned with older cultures. Even if the president for whom we are performing the play is a creature of the present, I believe our challenge, in addressing our leaders as in teaching our students, is to animate the past, to show how great works and ideas do indeed possess “a life beyond life.” Please do not imagine that in making this recommendation I am claiming that research into the distant past is superior to research on more recent periods. I am simply suggesting a pragmatic strategy: because our colleagues in the sciences must focus so intently on the present (and indeed the future), considering what might be gained by focusing on the past may strike them as fresh and different, and may therefore remind them of the core values studied and celebrated by the humanities.

In preparing our play within the play, we should not assume that the kinds of talk in which we normally engage will catch the conscience of the king by their own intrinsic worth. Hamlet does not help his play succeed by engaging in an obnoxious running commentary: “His name’s Gonzago. The story is extant, and writ in choice Italian.” Neither the king nor the general public is likely to respond positively to scholarship written to display erudition and please the other six people in the writer’s cherished subfield. Thanks in part to a tenure process obsessed with peer review (itself a product of the science model), humanities scholars have lost interest in addressing larger audiences. In 1947 (the year of my birth) Cleanth Brooks published *The Well-Wrought Urn*. In its long life, this book has never been out of print, and has sold at least 8 million copies. No humanities scholar today, not even Harold Bloom, imagines writing a book that will sell 8 thousand copies. Again, humanities institutes are well-positioned to help us move away from our narrow conception of audience. When we promote interdisciplinary discourse, normally through a Fellows’ Seminar attended by the resident faculty fellows, at which participants learn to describe their work to colleagues not necessarily members of their own disciplines, we are actually teaching our colleagues how to address a wider public. Participation in such seminars may encourage some colleagues to write books designed to reach an audience beyond their immediate disciplinary peers. In the long run, such books may help us build a stronger connection to the public, and thus put us in a stronger position when the time comes to seek support, both public and private. And of course, this principle applies even more strongly to the performance we stage for the king or queen. When we know that the president or provost
is coming to visit, we will want to feature those among us who have a gift for turning ideas into stories.

Even when we have chosen our best actors, we will need to rehearse. “Speak the speech, I pray you,” says Hamlet, “trippingly on the tongue: but if you mouth it, as many of our players do, I had as lief the town-crier spoke my lines.” If we truly wish to catch the conscience of the king, we will not invite him to hear a paper mumbled by a colleague uncomfortable with performance. We will choose our most engaging colleagues, and encourage them to speak effectively. Hamlet’s advice is apposite: our representative actors should not “tear a passion to tatters,” but they should “Be not too tame neither.” We are, after all, responsible for the growing indifference of the public to the humanities, in part because of our unease with performance. That was one of my many reasons for suggesting, in a little book I wrote in the late 1990s, that the humanities make common cause with the arts. As I argued then, donors, trustees, and presidents are more likely to come to a dramatic performance, a musical performance, a poetry reading, or an art exhibition than to an erudite lecture. An ideal “play within the play” for our purposes is the performance framed by analysis. I am frequently touched and surprised by how many concert-goers show up early for a pre-concert lecture on the music, evidently eager to learn more about what they are about to hear, and this is an audience we must learn to serve. The most successful single event in my eight years as director of the University of Michigan Humanities Institute was a student performance of the Bacchae of Euripides, produced by a graduate student fellow of the Institute and followed (the next morning) by a seminar taught by a brilliant assistant professor. Not only did a number of interested alumni attend, knowing full well that they would thereby become objects of our fundraising efforts, but the dean of the college, a number-crunching political scientist known for disparaging remarks about the “soft” nature of humanities scholarship, came to the play, felt the power of Euripides’s enduring drama, and showed up on Saturday morning to participate in the seminar. We had, in that moment, caught the conscience of the queen. We need to keep finding ways to do so.

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