



IN MEMORIAM

Robert William Dent
Professor of English
UC Los Angeles
1917 — 2005

A loyal member of the UCLA English department for over thirty years, Bob Dent was esteemed for his personal virtues, his kindness and integrity, and for his steadfast dedication to his students, his scholarship, and UCLA.

Born on September 8, 1917, in Portland, Oregon, Dent was educated at the University of Oregon, where he received the bachelor's and master's degree. As an officer in the Navy during World War II, he saw combat aboard a destroyer in the South Pacific, and was awarded the Bronze Star for heroic action off Okinawa. After the war he resumed his education at the University of Chicago, where he received the doctorate in English literature in 1951. A year later he joined the UCLA English department as an instructor, with principal responsibility for teaching the drama of Shakespeare and his contemporaries, a field in which UCLA's distinction was already widely recognized.

Dent's first book, *Webster's Borrowing*, appeared in 1960 from the University of California Press. A study of the Jacobean dramatist, John Webster, it was described by a contemporary scholar as "a major contribution to the scholarship on a tragic dramatist who ranks second only to Shakespeare in his age," a "work of impressive learning, judiciously organized and presented," to which "all future students of Webster must be indebted."

The principal scholarly project of Dent's career came to fruition in two publications of the 1980s. In *Shakespeare's Proverbial Language*, published in 1981 by the University of California Press, he identified, indexed, and classified proverbial references in the dramatist's thirty-eight plays. In *Proverbial Language in English Drama Exclusive of Shakespeare 1495-1616*, which appeared in 1984 from the same press, he indexed the plays of Shakespeare's predecessors and contemporaries, a task that included some 300 plays and extended to 800 pages.

The underlying concern of both works is with language that, in the words of a seventeenth-century predecessor, had been "legitimated by Prescription and long Trace of Ancestriall Time." The earlier book is perhaps the better known, as it offers striking insight into way Shakespeare's imagination transmuted traditional proverbial materials into great drama. It is clear from the introduction, where Dent explains the decisions involved in defining and organizing his material, that he was a meticulous scholar, who excelled at the lucid presentation of complex information-- which here comprises proverbs noted by earlier scholars and thousands of new additions of his own. And he spices what might have been bland with a dry wit. The proverb, he notes, was once defined by its "Sense, shortnesse, and Salt." "Ever uncomfortably aware of my inconsistencies," he confides, "I have come to associate myself with a proverb created by Emerson." He refers, no doubt, to Emerson's mockery of a "foolish" consistency that is "the hobgoblin of little minds."

A maker of indexes, like a maker of dictionaries, runs the risk of being termed a "harmless drudge," to borrow Samuel Johnson's wry definition of a lexicographer. But in fact Dent's painstaking work, like Johnson's, lays down the bedrock on which later scholarship will be founded. It is meant to be trusted and used. The seriousness with which he took this responsibility can be judged from the dedicatees of the earlier volume,

John Crow, J.C. Maxwell, and F.P. Wilson, all 20th century scholars who preceded him in the study of Shakespeare and proverbial language. Dent's scholarly perspective was long, and he worked in the imaginative and moral company of those whose work he admired and sought to emulate.

Throughout his years at UCLA he published numerous articles on Shakespeare and the Renaissance drama, among them a celebrated essay on "Imagination in A Midsummer Night's Dream." He was responsible, as well, for the annotated bibliographies that appeared annually in Shakespeare Quarterly between 1959 and 1964. According to the journal's editor, these were "the best organized, the most complete in point of coverage, and technically the most perfect that we have had." His scholarship by no means ended with retirement; distressed by the inaccuracy of critical comment on the language of Joyce's Ulysses, one of his favorite books, Dent produced Colloquial Language in Ulysses — A Reference Tool, which appeared in 1994 from the University of Delaware Press and is widely used today.

As a teacher, Dent brought Renaissance drama to generations of undergraduate and graduate students. Several of the latter wrote dissertations under his direction, and went on to teach at major universities, including Florida and Purdue. He was known for his enthusiasm in the classroom, and for insisting on grading exams and papers himself. "He is completely giving of his time and talents," wrote a department chair. "He is patient; he is understanding. The students trust him and admire him."

He served the university and department in many ways. As Assistant Dean of the College of Letters and Science he directed the undergraduate honors program for six years. He chaired important Senate committees, and took an active role in the UCLA chapter of the national honor society, Phi Beta Kappa. At various times he served the department as Acting Chair, Vice Chair for undergraduate studies, member of the Executive Committee, and Director of the Student Research Program. He organized the department's new degree program in creative writing.

As a colleague, Bob Dent will be remembered as a provider of wise advice, a quiet and effective worker for the common good. One endearing virtue was his modesty; another was his generosity to younger colleagues, several of whom he helped win national reputations.

In return, UCLA seems to have given him satisfaction and contentment. When invited to apply for a distinguished chair at an eastern university, he replied: "I have been very happy at UCLA, both personally and professionally, and in both respects a future here looks good to me."

Much happiness came as well from Bob's family. He and his wife, the former Ellen Quinlivan, were married for nearly fifty years. For many of those years they lived in Sherman Oaks, where they raised their five children, Vivian, Paul, Mary, John, and Sheila. Bob had a talent for friendship; among his close friends one might name his UCLA colleague, the late Blake Nevius, and his fellow Shakespearean at Charles University, Zdenek Stribrny. Bob loved the California landscape, and could be found walking on fire trails in the Santa Monica Mountains, or escaping with family and friends to a creekside cabin in the Eastern Sierra. He died on July 16, 2005.

Paul D. Sheats