

Reply:

Given my conviction that our profession profits by the engagement of many minds, the discussion of many voices, I was pleased to see the letters by Helen M. Kim and Tim Prior. The experience Kim reports of course saddens me. The discipline she describes, the teachers and students she has encountered differ dramatically from those I have known. If her description of our field is accurate, she is right in arguing that the present situation needs to be “rectified.” But I would claim for my own experience as much authority as I grant to hers. More fortunate than Kim in my early career (no doubt largely by virtue of historical accident), I have over almost forty years, in several institutions and professional organizations, encountered devoted teachers who consistently reflect about and discuss their pedagogical activities. I have had hardworking, delightful, often intellectually stimulating colleagues. I have been a witness to and a participant in engaged and fruitful discussion emanating from people of widely differing views. I have even been involved in cheerful, productive department meetings. Because I find that politicized denunciations of “the humanities” or of “professors” delineate unrecognizable people and practices, I think it important to affirm the value of the profession of literature as it continues to exist.

That said, I remain troubled by the pain and outrage Kim’s letter conveys. Her words call attention once more to the intolerable situation currently confronted by many who have received doctorates in recent years only to find themselves struggling for positions in shrinking faculties where those fortunate enough to have jobs compete ruthlessly to hold on to them and those with tenure feel overworked and guilty, as well as helpless against economic actualities and political currents. The view from below, surely, has never seemed uglier. “[E]gotism, ruthlessness, callousness” undoubtedly exist and merit rebuke. “[P]ower without responsibility and . . . privilege without merit” flourish in some places (not only in our profession), and I wish it were otherwise. All of us need to take seriously Kim’s reminders of misery, of the harsh judgments such misery helps to engender, and of the people and actions that on occasion substantiate the harshest of judgments.

I have no quarrel with Tim Prior, whose questions strike me as acute and provocative and very difficult. To the last of them, in particular (“would it not be a more fruitful project to critique historicism’s politics . . . ?”), I can only say, Maybe so. I hope that he will pursue that project, for everyone’s benefit.

PATRICIA MEYER SPACKS
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The Untitled Discipline

To the Editor:

As Hannah Berliner Fischthal has pointed out (Forum, 110 [1995]: 416), there is no generic label, no professional term, for what we do and who we are in English, and this lack sets us off as different from practitioners of other academic disciplines. I believe that the ramifications of this point are important, especially when the job market is not stable.

When I chose an undergraduate major, what worried me most was my geologist father’s advice: Pick a field where you will have a professional title that will stay with you no matter what your job is. Studying literature did not offer me that defining title.

In nearly any other profession, an individual who has been admitted to the discipline has the power to shape it. A professional gains the linguistic power of definition through a title, and, as a result, the title becomes a license for creativity. A mathematician may teach or not teach, be employed or not employed but is still a mathematician. The same power is inherent in all the sciences—there are biologists, chemists, physicists, geologists, botanists, zoologists—down to narrow subdivisions within specialties. Most of the arts and humanities have similar professional titles. There are artists, musicians, historians, philosophers, anthropologists, economists, sociologists, psychologists, geographers, and librarians. But what do we who cluster in English departments call ourselves besides teachers of English?

I admit that a few specialists within the field of English, such as linguists, lexicographers, and etymologists, have defined themselves. Particular eras or types of literature may be studied by such people as medievalists, folklorists, or, perhaps, Victorianists, but these titles may be shared by those in the history and anthropology departments and tend to conflate scholars with their studies. And this difficulty hints at the current situation. While the question of what English is has attracted much discussion, the person who studies English is not clearly distinguishable from the field of English. For the most part, we start out as English majors and become teachers of (fill in your favorite). When we do not teach, we may become general writers or scholars or take up a nonacademic occupation. Our discipline provides us with no title to support our self-confidence in times of unemployment. When teaching jobs are not available, not having a defining title makes it that much easier to lose our professional identity. Trying to be signified without a signifier makes us ask if we really signify at all.

Lacking a word with the suffix *-ist*, *-ian*, *-or*, or *-er*, we seem almost fated to continually question what we are

doing and who we are. This makes the process of explaining ourselves and what we do to the general public, university administrations, and students even more difficult.

In addition, the lack of an agreed-on title makes it difficult to write about the people who make up the English department. All studies that seek to examine the history of English and literature studies must tiptoe around the subject. As a result, it is difficult to speak about the practitioners of the subject directly and specifically. Awkwardly, we refer to English educators, English teachers, and professors of English.

How did we get into this situation? Are we too new a profession to have acquired a defining word? Bear in mind that *scientist* only goes back to the 1830s. In contrast, references to *composition* as the act of putting ideas into a written form go back to the 1600s. The first chair of English literature was established at the University of Edinburgh in 1762. A lack of tradition does not seem to be the problem.

It is possible that a generic term for the English or literature scholar or teacher was not developed because of a historical resistance to professionalism. Certainly, a run through the words grouped around the dictionary entries for *composition*, *bibliography*, *grammar*, *literature*, and *English* presents few options for a name, except perhaps *philologist*.

The more I look at it, the more promising this word becomes. While *philology* was eventually rerouted to the more narrow study of comparative linguistics, it once included the study of culture, a usage closer to the modern emphasis of the profession. The *OED* gives the now rare general sense of *philology* as “the study of literature, in a wide sense, including grammar, literary criticism and interpretation, the relation of literature and written records to history, etc.” According to Gerald Graff’s *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1987), the narrowing of this word’s meaning was possibly due to the “positivist temper of early professionalism, which worked against broad cultural generalization” (74). The older, more general usage still remains, however, in the titles of some scholarly journals.

While I find myself invoking the older, broader definition of philology, my purpose is not to define what or how we study but rather to give an identity to the scholars who pursue such questions, to suggest a professional title, and, I hope, to offer at least a start toward self-respect. *Philologist* does have some negative connotations, since it is closely identified with the language-literature split recognized by Albert S. Cook in his 1897 Presidential Address (Graff 80); however, perhaps enough time has passed that the word might be viewed as neutral. If I am wrong and my proposal strikes others as too modest in

the Swiftian sense of the word, I leave it to them to suggest an alternative that will include members of the entire English department.

Of course, what I am discussing here is merely the lack of a word, but if we agree on anything in English, it is that language is important. And scholars who are not sure of the validity of their professional identity will suffer the vagaries of the job market the most.

LILA M. HARPER
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To the Editor:

In response to Hannah Berliner Fischthal’s request for a title for “literature persons,” let me offer the following with a wry smile. Given the staggering advances in computer technology, interactive television, and other pictorial communications media and given the nearly wholehearted embrace of these technologies in education in this point-and-click world, where language becomes a nuisance, the so-called experts in literature, those who maintain a quaint interest in the archaic skills of reading and writing, could simply be known as they once were: the literates.

KEITH FYNAARDT
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To the Editor:

Hannah Berliner Fischthal launches a search for an appellation for “literature persons.”

Sifting the models she offers, we could generate the following:

- literet (like *poet*)
- literatist (like *linguist*, *dramatist*)
- literatician (like *rhetorician*)
- literatographer (like *historiographer*)

None of these strikes my ear euphoniously. The problem lies in the sound of *-iterat-*. It’s a phonetic element that doesn’t combine well with any element except *-ure*. I say scrap it and start over.

Curiously, Fischthal omits a plausible model: *philosopher*. This suggests *philologist*, an honorable appellation tightly bound to the early years of the profession but perhaps associated, fairly or unfairly, with “old-fashioned” methods of scholarship. So I nominate a cognate: *philologer*. It has the advantage of sounding fresh while in fact being well-established. *The Random House Dictionary* defines the etymon of both *philologist* and