

215 West 78th Street
New York, NY 10024

January 15, 2015

Dr. Anthony Marx, President
The New York Public Library

Dear Dr. Marx,

I have been writing this letter for a long time. It is a plea to restore the research function of the 42nd Street Library. I have finally decided to tell you my story, which is really many stories about using what was once the best public library in the world.

I am an independent scholar with a Ph.D. from the City University of New York. I do all my research as a public citizen, with no access to private libraries.

When the Graduate Center moved to 42nd Street, there was barely a library, so CUNY made a deal with the NYPL; public money changed hands. I found my dissertation topic in an edition of plays on a teacher's suggested reading list. The book was in the 42nd Street stacks because it was not allowed to leave the building. It recently disappeared from the collection, though it was there until you emptied the stacks. It is now available at NYPL only in microform, and even that is off-site. My own book, which I donated, is also off-site.

I worked as an editor, but when I heard that the Shakespeare Variorum needed help, I applied. First I went to NYPL to read the ad in the *Times Literary Supplement* of London. The Variorum editor gave me a trial assignment in the *King Lear* quartos at NYPL. Half in jest, he gave me a letter of introduction in Latin. But this was the New York **Public** Library, open to all, and the Rare Book librarian was the legendary Daniel Traister, so I needed no Latin. I got the plum Variorum assignment—the stage history of *King Lear*—largely because I had access to the NYPL collections. Our Variorum edition of *King Lear*, to be published by the Modern Language Association, is in galleys.

Sadly, I have had to tell my Variorum colleagues that the NYPL is over . . . for now. Many of the books are off-site. Many are mis-labelled as on-site when they're off. Books can take many days to be delivered, and e-mail communication is spotty. Other books have been lost . . . or discarded. I requested two volumes of a series. They couldn't be found. I said it was hard to lose 21 volumes. A librarian overheard me and offered to look. He later e-mailed: All 21 volumes were indeed missing.

But there are almost no librarians. The line of reference librarians gone from the Catalogue Room were famous for their knowledge and their democratic treatment of every patron.

Now, where there used to be six librarians, there are only one or two, and they have other duties, like subbing at the delivery window!

The kind of scholarship I did can no longer be done at NYPL. I did much of my work at the Performing Arts Library, where the research function has been similarly dismantled. Books are off the premises. Open shelves filled with reference books in the third-floor research area have been emptied. Worst of all, there are no reference librarians in the research rooms—rendering those special collections almost useless.

One of the best things in my *Lear* essays is a "fresh" quotation from a major critic. I found it in a publisher's advertisement in a mid-20th-century book, which I wouldn't have seen if I hadn't been reading the original. (The ad will also be lost to digital readers, because it won't be scanned.) Another find was a review of Olivier's early *Lear* in a rare magazine. Recently, when I went to PA to confirm my sources, I couldn't find either item. There was no reference help on the third floor; I was sent downstairs to ask the lone librarian at the circulation desk. I was about to delete both quotes when I ran into a librarian I knew, who helped me.

What I cannot fathom is why the NYPL would jeopardize what the library was created for: books stored on site, for easy access, available to all. Instead, you have created a system that is difficult, inefficient and undemocratic. NYPL used to be open and available to anyone who walked in. Now a reader has to have many, scattered, days of free time. The system virtually requires e-mail and high-speed internet, which, as you often say, excludes a third of New Yorkers.

The inefficiencies of the online catalogue and the delivery system are roadblocks. Even with the old card catalogue, which was so much more complete, I knew that for many requests I would get a slip sending me to the reference desk. Sometimes I had made an obvious mistake. But often it became a learning experience with the librarian, where we figured it out together. We almost always found what I was looking for. And it all happened in real time: the call slip, the rejection, the assistance, the find. Now you can waste a week and never get your book.

Since I am finally writing, please let me be frank, even at the risk of sounding rude. It is only fitting that readers are skeptical about the library's priorities (e.g., a children's room . . . in a neighborhood without families). The most convincing thing would be to put some of your best critics on the Board of Trustees and the Researcher Group—architects, scholars and librarians who not only treasure the library, but actually use it. There were once four libraries in Midtown. NYPL sold Donnell, then tried to sell two more—the most up-to-date (fully wired) and the most heavily used. You have come a long way by saving Mid-Manhattan for the people. Now please save 42nd Street: retrofit the stacks and replace the books. And hire some librarians.

Paula Glatzer