

STANFORD UNIVERSITY
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OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT

MEMORIAL RESOLUTION

ELEANOR PROSSER

(1922-1991)

Faculty and staff colleagues, alumni, and students have been profoundly saddened by the recent death of Professor Emerita Eleanor Prosser. Professor Prosser died at her home in Los Altos on July 21st after surgery necessitated by the severe arthritis that demanded her early retirement in 1983. Throughout her illness she demonstrated an exceptional strength of character. Nothing in Eleanor Prosser's life was more important to her than her work with students. Her decision to retire revealed that her bravery and good spirits had hidden the extent of the obstacles she had faced in the decade before her retirement. Her colleagues realized that she no longer had the energy to outface the physical limitations that the disease imposed upon her. Faculty and students alike recognized the high personal cost of her final years of teaching and came to appreciate that the efforts to continue had been a remarkable gift to the University and its students. While Eleanor's good humor masked the difficulties she encountered in her last few years of teaching, her enjoyment of teaching and of life in general was genuine. Her hearty laugh reverberated in classrooms and faculty meetings and lifted the spirits of colleagues and students alike.

The vitality of her love for Shakespeare infused her teaching, and the text of his plays seemed to become a living presence as she lectured. At a time when Shakespearean scholarship tended to ignore the dynamics of performance, she focused on the language of the plays as it was heard in the theater. Her students recall both her reading of Shakespearean text, in which she called upon her talent as an actor, and the insights of her analysis that located the speech in its dramatic situation.

Ellie had a courtesy appointment in the Department of English, one with substantial benefits to English because of her wonderful sense of collegiality and her

close personal and professional relationships with members of the department. English faculty routinely consulted her about difficult problems in the interpretation of drama and stage practice in the Middle Ages and Renaissance. She generously shared her knowledge and, when she didn't have solutions or answers at her fingertips, she worked hard to find them.

Ellie also liked to argue with her colleagues in the English Department about interpretations of plays. A frequent source of contention was her claim, in her book *Hamlet and Revenge*, that Hamlet sinned in accepting the command of the ghost, and that all the literature on ghosts and revenge in the period would have made that fact clear to the audience. Ellie stood her ground in these disputes, but she did so with unflinching good humor and the willingness to listen to alternative views. This combination of strength and openness was typical of her.

Ellie was generous with her knowledge and energy in other University areas. One example: when she was already suffering severe pain from arthritis, she accepted the invitation to lecture on *Hamlet* to over three hundred students in the Great Works track of what was then called the Western Culture Program. She was as vivacious, engaging, and enthusiastic as she must have been when she first lectured on the play – a style that was her gift to others in private relationships as well as public performances.

Prosser, who was born in Pasadena, California in 1922, completed her first two years of undergraduate study at Pasadena City College in 1941. After working at a wartime plant for several years, she returned to school and graduated from Occidental College in 1950, with a major in Speech and emphasis in Drama. She served briefly as an Acting Instructor of Speech and as Director of Drama at Occidental immediately after her graduation. In 1957, she received an A.M. Degree in English at Stanford University. The same year she joined the faculty of San Jose State College as an assistant professor. She completed the Ph.D. degree at Stanford in 1960. In 1961, the Stanford University Press published her first book, *Drama and Religion in the English Mystery Plays: A Re-evaluation*. While this book, which remains an important contribution to English drama, brought her a reputation as an important scholar, the publication of her second book, *Hamlet and Revenge*, in 1967 moved her into the first rank of Shakespeare scholars, and the Press published her revision in 1971. She served on the Board of Trustees of the Shakespeare Association of America from 1975-1978, and as a member of the Advisory Council for the World Centre for Shakespeare Studies from 1973.

Prosser, who had taught at Stanford in 1963 as a Visiting Associate Professor of English, joined the faculty of the Department of Drama in 1966. In 1968, she was promoted to the rank of Professor. Throughout her tenure at Stanford she remained committed to both graduate and undergraduate education. Her undergraduate courses in dramatic literature and history challenged scores of students who learned to share her enthusiasm for the theater, and her rigorous standards demanded that doctoral candidates in Drama demonstrate excellence in the techniques of research and scholarship. For a number of years she taught Drama 300, Introduction to Graduate Study, which required weekly papers based on trips to the library. Because she marked them very carefully, spending a great deal of time on them, students learned a great deal of useful material and the research skills of a lifetime. Her detailed, relentless editing taught both undergraduates and graduates the value of plain, direct, and forceful prose.

In 1976-77, she served as Acting Chairman of the Department of Drama. Her insistence that the term *chairman* was an appropriate designation for both genders brought her attention in the national press; and the controversy that generated from this situation delighted her. While Eleanor Prosser did not align herself directly with the feminist issues that marked the final years of her career, her own career defined a model for many women students who actively credit Prosser's influence on their work in higher education.

While Eleanor Prosser's primary mentor at Stanford was the late Virgil K. Whitaker, as a doctoral candidate in English in the fifties, she assisted Professor Margery Bailey, one of Stanford's most celebrated teachers in the 1930s, 40s, and 50s. Miss Bailey, of course, at this time was an active participant at the Ashland Shakespeare Festival, where she first witnessed Eleanor Prosser's skill as an actress. Prosser acted with the Ashland company from 1952 to 1954, performing Beatrice in *Much Ado*, Portia in *Julius Caesar*, and Hermione in *The Winter's Tale*. She also appeared as an actress at Stanford, both in a production of Maeterlinck's *The Blue Bird* (1952) and in the leading role in Molière's *The Learned Ladies* (1961). While she didn't continue performing, her skill as an actor informed her teaching, particularly in Shakespeare courses. While her style of guiding students was far gentler than Miss Bailey's, the classrooms of each shared a similar excitement and energy. Consequently, many of her Stanford colleagues who remembered Professor Bailey recognized the appropriateness of Prosser's appointment as the Margery Bailey Professor of English and Dramatic Literature in 1981.

Professor Prosser's appointment to an endowed chair acknowledged her value as both a teacher and a scholar. At the University Commencement in 1981, Eleanor Prosser also received the coveted Gores Award for teaching. This award commemorated, most especially, her success in her highly popular Introduction to Shakespeare.

Professor Prosser's final book, *Shakespeare's Anonymous Editors: Scribe and Compositor in the Folio Text of 2 Henry IV*, published in 1980, continued her relationship with the Stanford University Press. This detailed study made a major contribution to our understanding of the ways in which the manuscript text of Shakespeare's play was subject to the intervention of compositor and printer. This important book demonstrates the kind of scrupulous scholarship that always informed her work in combination with the particular richness of her theatrical and critical imagination. Eleanor Prosser remained committed to the idea of Shakespeare's texts as scripts for performance, and at the time of her death she was planning on resuming her work on a book that would help the actor speak Shakespearean verse.

Eleanor Prosser's rigorous but benevolent guidance enriched the research and the personal lives of many students. While the nature of their own critical work may depart from the particular historical orientation of her scholarship, the model of that scholarship and the care with which she herself wrote informs the work of each of the graduate students she taught. Her advising also defined, for countless students, the nature of academic mentorship. This remarkable legacy constitutes Eleanor Prosser's most substantial memorial.

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