

In Memoriam

Kate Gartner Frost

25 March 1939 – 25 July 2010

Mary Catherine Frost was gifted with the Feast of the Annunciation (25 March) for her birthday, and from that day until her graduation from Barry University in Miami in 1962 John Donne was her preferred poet. In her senior year she was president of the literary society and co-editor of the yearbook and was graduated *cum laude*. In 1965 she was awarded a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship which eventually led her to the Princeton Graduate School in 1969 when Princeton finally opened its doors to women students. I remember her presence in my Spenser and Romance seminar only too well because Kate would miss no opportunity to ask me why I preferred to teach “long-winded” Spenser instead of “succinct” Donne. My reply was always: “Go read the sermons,” advice which bore fruit in that she presented a dissertation on the *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions* in 1974, which she wrote under the direction of Earl Miner and Wilbur S. Howell. In seminar, beyond her defense of Donne, she was always bright and brash but disarmed criticism with a warm smile and a well-trained laugh. When she was offered the job at the University of Texas, Austin, we at Princeton all gave her advice about the virtues of restraint of speech.

Heeding those warnings, perhaps, yet remaining true to her own sense of intellectual engagement, during her career at Texas, Kate distinguished herself as a teacher and a scholar. The Texas Students’ Association honored her with their Outstanding Undergraduate Teaching Award, for example, and she enjoyed many other similar accolades for her classroom performance. Kate’s contributions to the field of Donne studies were also well-received. Author of many articles on Donne’s verse—and even a few on the Lothian portrait of the poet—Kate was best known for her groundbreaking book, *Holy Delight: Typology, Numerology, and Autobiography in Donne’s “Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions”* (1990). Never waning in her devotion to Donne’s works, in her last years, Kate was involved in editing the *Songs and Sonets* as part of the *Variorum* project. Kate was also a vital presence at the Donne Society’s meetings; indeed, her 2009 Presidential Address, a reflection on Donne’s *Devotions* at times both clinically detached and intensely personal, will long be remembered by those who witnessed it. (The text of this address appears in this volume of *John Donne Journal*.)

Kate was remarkable in many ways, but surely the most amazing thing about her was her capacity for cheerful suffering. Her adult life was anything but a series of triumphs, as Arlen Nydam—Kate’s last doctoral student—recalled when I asked him to share his reflections on working with Kate. Arlen noted that Kate once revealed to him that it was Mahler’s “Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen” that “got [her] through grad school.” After earning her doctorate, Kate found her planned edition of the *Devotions* stymied repeatedly, a professional challenge for Kate that Arlen was able to trace in correspondence among her papers. For perhaps the last thirteen years of her life, Arlen went on to say, Kate was constantly battling Hepatitis C, which caused her body to swell, and since 2008 liver cancer. In recent years, he added, several surgeries had left her stitched and scarred—and if that was not enough, in the past five years she had also been T-boned in a car accident, had her shoulder dislocated at a Shakespeare play, cracked her pelvis after slipping in her garden, fractured her skull on the sidewalk when her new French bulldog pulled her off balance, and blackened her eye on an armoire after tripping on her dog.

Through it all, Kate’s spirit never seemed to flag. Somehow she was able to bracket off all the pain and disappointment in her life, and keep it from infecting her friends. As Arlen remarked, “Those of us who knew her trials were constantly amazed at her ability to laugh them off, as when she called me, laughing, to tell about her fractured skull and black eye (they occurred days apart). Or as when she dispensed dissertation and writing advice (she was a master teacher of writing), even though suffering, on top of all her other pains, the discomfort of a hernia—which she referred to as ‘Herman the German.’” To the last, Kate’s indomitable spirit was always finding an outlet in her words.

May she rest in peace.

Thomas P. Roche, Jr.
Princeton University, Emeritus

Arlen Nydam
University of Texas, Austin