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Barbara Lewalski: A Tribute

Claude J. Summers

Although her shyness and natural reserve were sometimes misinterpreted as aloofness, Barbara Lewalski was a nurturing person, famous for her devotion to her students and for wearing her erudition lightly. She was never intentionally intimidating and was always gracious. Nevertheless, for many years, and before I ever met her, she terrified me.

More accurately, the *legend* of Barbara Lewalski inspired terror among a number of graduate students in English at the University of Chicago in the late 1960s. She had left Chicago with a Ph.D. in 1956, but when I was admitted to the Ph.D. program in 1967, so powerful was the impression she had made that her absence constituted a presence, one that had been enhanced for me by the publication in 1966 of *Milton's Brief Epic: The Genre, Meaning, and Art of 'Paradise Regained'*.

An extraordinary achievement, Lewalski's magisterial consideration of the complex generic and rhetorical traditions of the "brief epic" remains some fifty-two years later an essential book for the study of Milton. It not only significantly rehabilitated the reputation of *Paradise Regained* by placing it in important contexts and by explaining its artistry, but it also advanced our understanding more generally of how the poet worked and how he thought.

I remember reading it with excitement and admiration, awestruck by its unusual combination of broad learning and sensitive criticism. I assumed that it had been written by a senior scholar, that it was the culmination of many decades of research and meditation. Hence, I was startled when I learned that it had originated as a recent dissertation at the University of Chicago.

My shock was increased when I learned through the graduate student grapevine that one of the readers of her dissertation, a senior professor with whom I was hoping to work, had pronounced it merely "satisfactory," a rumor that many years later Barbara confirmed, though she added with good humor that the reader in question considered "satisfactory" high praise.

As a new Ph.D. student, I had been urged to begin thinking about areas of specialization and dissertation topics. I had already decided that I wanted to pursue my interest in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century literature, but I was not at all certain what I wanted to write about. My anxiety was considerably heightened by the fear that Barbara Lewalski had set the bar for Chicago dissertations so high that I would never meet it.

My worry was lessened when I read other dissertations of the era and noted how rare Barbara's command of scholarship actually was and concluded that no university could insist on that level of expertise as a prerequisite for a doctorate. Luckily, my terror of Barbara Lewalski—the legend as well as the woman—dissipated over the years even as she steadily produced seminal books and essays and rose to the very pinnacle of our profession. As I came to know her a little and experienced first-hand her genuine collegiality and contagious intellectual excitement, the terror was replaced by unalloyed admiration.

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The qualities of broad learning and acute criticism that mark *Milton's Brief Epic* also distinguish her subsequent books, which are also large and capacious considerations of how various classical and biblical traditions and forms affect sixteenth- and seventeenth-century literature in manifold ways. Each significantly altered the received understanding of the subjects she explores.

Donne's 'Anniversaries' and the Poetry of Praise: The Creation of a Symbolic Mode (1973), for example, elucidates Donne's epideictic poetry, including the Verse Letters, the Epicedes and Obsequies, and, especially, the *Anniversaries*. Regarding the latter as complex mixed-genre works that incorporate thematic and structural elements from such forms as the funeral elegy, the funeral sermon, the hymn, the

anatomy, and the Protestant meditation, Lewalski explains how Donne developed a unique meditative mode through which he could praise individuals by presenting them as exemplars or symbols of various aspects of Christian life or belief.

Protestant Poetics and the Seventeenth-Century Religious Lyric (1979) changed our understanding of the devotional poetry of the seventeenth century by locating the sources of its theory and aesthetics not in the Roman Catholic meditational traditions, which had previously been emphasized, but in the Bible itself and in fundamental Protestant assumptions about art and the spiritual life. In this influential book, the recipient of the Modern Language Association's James Russell Lowell Prize, Lewalski extrapolates from materials such as biblical commentaries and rhetorical handbooks a poetics that helped shape the work of Donne, Herbert, Vaughan, Traherne, Taylor, and others.

Perhaps her greatest book, *Paradise Lost and the Rhetoric of Literary Forms* (1985), is typically Lewalskian in that it marshals an encyclopedic knowledge of genres and subgenres, topoi and modes to argue that Milton's heroic poem is a kind of symphony of genres, an epic with a tragedy at its center that modulates into Christian comedy and prophecy. Lewalski's enormous store of learning serves her compelling critical sensibility as she deftly explores how Milton frequently manipulates classical and Renaissance poetics for transgressive ends.

In *Writing Women in Jacobean England, 1603–1625* (1993), Lewalski highlights the literary production of women in the earlier seventeenth century. Applying some of the same techniques of critical analysis employed in her previous works, she illuminates this rich body of literature by placing it in various historical and contemporaneous contexts. By examining the works of such figures as Elizabeth Cary, Aemelia Lanyer, Rachel Speght, and Mary Wroth, Lewalski documents the emergence of a sense of feminine identity. (Lewalski's enterprise of discovering and recovering women's literature became apparent in 1986, when the fifth edition of *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* was issued. This edition, the first after which she assumed editorship of the seventeenth-century section, significantly enlarged the space allotted to women's voices and perspectives of the period. As editor of so significant an anthology, now in its ninth edition, she challenged

the received understanding of the era by expanding and diversifying the list of canonical authors.)

Lewalski's other major book, *The Life of John Milton: A Critical Biography* (2000), solidified her reputation as the leading Miltonist of our time. Not only does it provide a detailed account of Milton's life and places his literary and political works in the important contexts of his life and times, but it also offers thoughtful critical readings of them. It has been acclaimed as the most significant biography of the poet since William Riley Parker's *John Milton: A Life* (1968).

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In addition to these monographs, Lewalski also published dozens of essays and significant editorial work, including an edition of the *Polemics and Poems of Rachel Speght* (1996), as well as editions of *Paradise Lost* (2007) and *Milton's Shorter Poems* (2012).

Lewalski was an extraordinary scholar, but she was also an important presence in our profession, a mainstay of the scholarly organizations that facilitate the exchange of ideas and promote good fellowship. An active member of the Modern Language Association from 1956, she served as a member of the Executive Council from 1980 to 1984. She also held memberships in the American Philosophical Society, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the International Association of University Professors of English, the Renaissance Society of America, the Milton Society of America, and the John Donne Society.

Like many others, I first met her at a Milton Society dinner, probably in 1970, where I also met two other heroes of mine, J. Max Patrick and John Shawcross. Over the years, we encountered each other frequently at conferences and seminars in the United States and abroad. Perhaps because of a shared shyness, we never became close friends or confidants, but she was someone I was always happy to see, eager to talk with, and glad to hear from.

At scholarly meetings, Barbara was invariably welcoming and positive, especially to younger scholars. She modeled a style of professionalism that was supportive rather than competitive. She was eager to share her ideas with others and to engage in scholarly debate.

But she never prosecuted personal grudges or sought to advance her positions at the expense of others.

Barbara was probably unaware of it—at least, she never acknowledged it—but in the 1970s and 1980s she became a kind of cult figure to a group of younger (mostly gay male) scholars, who shared "Barbara-sightings" with each other at conferences and exchanged tidbits of information about her. With no intention of mockery, we affectionately referred to her as "Babs" (because of a certain resemblance to Beverly Sills) or "Barbie," the latter especially when she was accompanied by her husband Ken, a historian whom she had met and married in graduate school and who spent most of his teaching career at Rhode Island College. (The devotion of "Ken and Barbie" to each other was palpable. They had been married for 50 years when he died in 2006.)

The fact is that Barbara, despite—or perhaps because of—her maternal demeanor, displayed a natural charisma that was similar to the down-to-earth glamour projected by Beverly Sills. The two unlikely divas were utterly devoid of pretentiousness, yet could effortlessly dominate a gathering by sheer dint of their remarkable presence. They inspired the adulation of aging fan-boys who saw in them a rare level of talent and accomplishment.

Barbara excelled as a teacher as well as a scholar. She joined the English Department at Brown in 1956. She became director of graduate studies in English in 1968 and chaired the Renaissance studies program from 1976 to 1980. From 1976 until her departure for Harvard in 1982, she held Brown's Alumni-Alumnae University Professorship.

At Harvard, she was the William R. Kenan Professor of English Literature and of the History of Literature. She served as chair of the History and Literature program during the 1980s and as director of Graduate Studies from 1997 to 2004. Upon her retirement in 2011, she was appointed William R. Kenan, Jr. Research Professor and later was named Professor Emerita.

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At both Brown and Harvard, Barbara was known as a demanding but encouraging teacher and mentor. The affection she inspired in her

students is evident in the festschrift edited by Amy Boesky and Mary Thomas Crane: *Form and Reform in Renaissance England: Essays in Honor of Barbara Kiefer Lewalski* (2000). The essays in this collection, written almost entirely by former students of Lewalski, reflect the breadth and depth of Barbara's contribution to the field of Renaissance studies, especially her interests in history and genre, and testify to how her research and mentorship changed "the topography of English Renaissance criticism and literature."[1]

When Barbara Lewalski died on March 2, 2018, at the age of 87, she had established herself as the leading English Renaissance scholar of her generation. Laden with honors, she had received almost every accolade the profession affords. Not only had she received NEH, Guggenheim, and Fulbright Fellowships, as well as awards for specific books and essays, but she had also been named Honored Scholar of the Milton Society at the absurdly young age of 46 and had subsequently received the Paul Oscar Kristeller lifetime achievement award from the Reniassance Society of America in 2016.

As her *New York Times* obituary noted, she was a "Barrier Breaker," who became the first woman to be granted tenured and endowed professorships in the English Departments at Brown and Harvard. She achieved some fame (or infamy) when she arrived at these august institutions and blithely ignored some petty "traditions" that prohibited women from entering certain buildings by the front doors. For example, "She refused to be consigned to the back door of the Brown faculty club, which was the portal reserved for professors' wives and other women."[2]

In a *Milton Quarterly* tribute to her dissertation adviser Ernest Sirluck, an eminent Miltonist whose illustrious career included service as president of the University of Manitoba and who died at the age of 95 in 2013, Barbara revealed how a Kansas farmer's daughter gained the confidence to aspire to academic heights at a time when women were woefully underrepresented in the profession.

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[1]Amy Boesky and Mary Thomas Crane, "Introduction," *Form and Reform in Renaissance England: Essays in Honor of Barbara Kiefer Lewalski* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2000), p. 7.

[2]Sam Roberts, "Barbara Lewalski, 87, Milton Scholar and Barrier Breaker, Is Dead," *New York Times* (March 29, 2018): B16.

In her tribute to Sirluck, she recounted their close association at the University of Chicago in the early 1950s. When they first met in 1950, Sirluck, the son of Jewish Russian emigrants to Canada, was a new assistant professor and she a new graduate student, armed with a bachelor's degree in Education and Social Science from Kansas State Teachers College (now Emporia State University). She took courses from Sirluck in Spenser and Milton and became his first Ph.D. advisee.

In the Sirluck tribute, Barbara addresses head-on the question of how she could have so readily imagined herself becoming an English professor despite there being no women professors in the English Department at Chicago or in many other places. "The reason," she concludes, "was partly the university itself, and partly Ernest."

"The university was then awash with *émigré* scholars of all kinds, refugees from Nazism and Communism, some of whom found homes in special committees—On Social Thought and On the History of Culture—if the regular departments had no place for them," she recalled. "So the Humanities Division was full of all sorts of academics (and also a wide range of graduate students); it did not seem, as so many academic institutions then did, like a white, upper-class, prep-school and ivy-educated gentlemen's club."

"The other reason," she added, "was Ernest. Probably because he too was an outsider who made it inside on ability, he seemed to suppose that other unlikely persons from unlikely backgrounds might do so too. At any rate, I never heard from him the least suggestion that, as a woman, I might not be suited to, or have much chance for, an academic life."[3]

The same encouragement she received from Sirluck, she gladly imparted to her own students and also to many of us who followed her career with admiration and gratitude. Especially to those of us who also identified as unlikely outsiders, she was the living, breathing symbol of the possibility of making it "inside on ability."

University of Michigan-Dearborn

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[3]Barbara Lewalski, "In Memoriam: Ernest Sirluck, 1918–2013," *Milton Quarterly* 47.4 (2013): 266.