

Memorial Minute for Elizabeth Wanning Harries, March 9, 2022, Faculty Meeting  
Written and read by Sharon Seelig, Roe/Straut Professor Emerita in the Humanities

Elizabeth Wanning Harries—Betsey—died on September 8, 2021, age 83. Her intellectual range and brilliance were balanced by practical good sense, her generous spirit coupled with action; she was an inspiring, beloved teacher and mentor; as a colleague she was like the keystone of an arch.

Betsey came from a family that loved books, music, and sailing—passions that she shared. Her early years were spent in Philadelphia, Connecticut, and Blue Hill, Maine, where, besides learning to sail, she devoured books in the town library. She received the B.A. with honors in English at Vassar, and the MAT in English and the Ph.D. in Comparative Literature at Yale, completing her degree while raising small children. She came to Smith in 1974, where she taught courses in English and Comparative Literature and in Women's Studies until her retirement in 2008, as the Helen and Laura Shedd Professor of Modern Languages.

Betsey's scholarly interests were grounded in two quite different periods, the 18<sup>th</sup> and the early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries; from that base she ventured out to teach courses in literary and non-literary fragments, fairy tales in their many formats and forms, the Romantics, women writers, the English novel, and Western Classics from Homer to Tolstoy; she was fully at home in English, German, and French. Her two award-winning books demonstrate her wide-ranging intellectual curiosity: in *The Unfinished Manner: Essays on the Fragment in the Later Eighteenth Century*, she moved from the Renaissance to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, from deliberately constructed literary fragments (beginning with Petrarch) to landscape gardens and ruins to the endlessly inventive novel *Tristram Shandy* and Coleridge's "Kubla Khan"; she saw significant connections between periods often characterized as antithetical, and like "an optometrist, with a collection of discrete lenses," she refused to use a single approach to simplify what she saw. In *Twice upon a Time:*

*Women Writers and the History of the Fairy Tale*, she explored the sophisticated tales written by women in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, so different from the simpler narratives often regarded as typical of the genre; moving to contemporary poetry, fiction, and art, she probed issues of framing and reframing, and their deeper implications for gender and culture.

Betsey was also the principal author and editor of the invaluable guide for Smith students called “Writing Papers” (now, much revised, in its 6<sup>th</sup> edition). It included such memorable advice as, “Don’t bite off the whole East Coast if all you mean to chew is Rhode Island.” In her last years she was writing a history of Kneisel Hall, the chamber music program in Blue Hill, where she, an excellent pianist, had once been a student, and where she served as a Trustee and supporter of its program for gifted young artists. She attended all of their concerts and invited them to her home to have lunch and to play on the lawn overlooking Blue Hill Bay.

Unsurprisingly, Betsey served on many important committees, more often than not as chair; in 2001-4, she chaired the English department. But for years she was at its very heart, working steadily to promote fairness and harmony—no mean feat. She defended those whom she believed had been unjustly treated; she advocated particularly, even fiercely, for junior faculty and for Ada Comstock students; at her retirement the Harries prize was established—for a graduating Ada who demonstrates excellence in the study of literature in any language.

Betsey read countless first drafts, not only those of her students, but of her colleagues, offering enormously useful comments; she saw connections we had missed, supplied references we were unaware of, saved us from missteps, guided deftly with a minimum of display. Shortly before her death, I saw, in an exchange of sorrowful emails, how many of us she had helped in that way.

When she retired from Smith, Betsey’s students organized a symposium to honor her; their rhapsodic letters praise her demanding, inspiring, and supportive teaching, her common

sense, her generosity, her knowledge of what each needed at a given point—whether it was a brusque or an encouraging comment on a paper, a piece of baklava and a cup of coffee in a moment of exhaustion, or the offer of a quiet apartment to live in to write a senior thesis. Her courses were rigorous—also creative, inventive, and fun. One student recalls her appearing at a Gen Lit dinner wearing a blue and white dirndl, modeling Goethe’s Gretchen; she interrupted a class to take students outside to observe a rare total eclipse of the sun; she encouraged senior comp lit majors to help shape the syllabus in their course in literary theory. Another writer cites Betsey’s “gruff voice and her bright, twinkling eyes, her ability to provide essential support without ever calling attention to her efforts—the sheer vigor of her energy, and the reliability of her human kindness.” More than once she changed a life.

Over the years I learned that Betsey’s integrity was absolute: she never betrayed a confidence, either personal or professional. And her excellent judgment and high standards were equaled only by her generosity: she judged precisely and unflinchingly, whether the quality of scholarship or a musical performance. But she spoke those truths selectively, in a way that benefited rather than harmed others. She had the old-fashioned virtues: she visited the sick and the elderly; she always knew who was in trouble, in the Smith community, in Northampton or Williamsburg, where she lived with her spouse Jennifer Whiting. She knew what good cause, in politics or social justice, needed her input—and she gave it unstintingly. She joined the Indivisibles in writing letters to help sway the election; she also traveled once a year to spend a day making Valentines with an old friend. She read widely, deeply, quickly, everything from cereal boxes, she said, to the nominations for the Booker Prize. In the spring before her death, Betsey was reading Thomas Mann’s *Doctor Faustus* in German, with a friend; and then, not

wanting to clutter her bookshelf, she returned it before the summer with thanks. No one can fill her place.