

Memorial Minute for Andrée Demay
Read by Janie Vanpée at the February 28, 2018 Faculty Meeting

Andrée Demay, professor emerita of French Language and Literature, passed away peacefully in her home on July 27, 2017, seven months after the decease of her life-long partner and friend, Sarah Morin.

Mademoiselle, as her students called her (and I was one of them) was first and foremost a teacher—rigorous, inspiring, “exigeante” or demanding, “sévère” (or strict). She taught me, a heritage speaker of French, to love Molière, Racine, Corneille, Pascal, Rousseau and Marivaux, and perhaps, more significantly, how to write French. I am here because of her own devotion to teaching French and her dedicated mentorship.

Born in Chateauroux, France, in 1922, she studied at the Sorbonne and spent the first part of her career teaching French in England, where she gained her impeccable diction in English, and then teaching English for a dozen years in France. A first stint teaching French at Dana Hall in 1958 must have inspired her; in 1962 she returned to Massachusetts to assume a position of Assistant professor at Smith College, where she taught for the next 33 years until her retirement in 1985.

Andrée Demay’s primary scholarly interest was 18th century French literature, in particular the novelist Marie-Jeanne Riccoboni on whom she published a study. The book, though short, inaugurated a belated recognition of this immensely successful novelist, forgotten during the 19th century. She was a member of various groups of 18th-century scholars and often taught an advanced course in her field. It was in her seminar on Diderot and Rousseau that I discovered my own passion for the Enlightenment and for teaching. During her thirty years at Smith, she taught a wide variety of courses, from intensive beginning language to senior seminars. Her former student and then colleague, Mary Ellen Birkett, recalls her French class on grammar and reading short stories from 1966 “as one of the most dynamic, terrifying yet inspiring classes she took that year. Mademoiselle Demay spoke a rapid patter that was still somehow clear because of her beautiful diction; and being small, but agile, she was always in motion, darting from one blackboard to the other and back to her desk, forcing us to pay attention. One day, around the time of a French presidential election, she decided that current events were more important than whatever grammar point had been assigned...and spent the entire class hour teaching us how the French political system works.” Mary Ellen adds that when she became a colleague of Andrée Demay, she learned that this was one of her principles: “sometimes more is to be learned by abandoning the curriculum than by sticking to it.”

During her tenure at Smith, Andrée Demay served in various administrative roles, including that of Chair of the Department and Director of the Junior Year in France, notably the year that ended in the Mai 1968 revolt. During the student uprising that May, she focused on helping her students finish their exams and finding quick ways to get them home safely. In a letter to President Mendenhall, she takes on a tone of reassurance, stating

Memorial Minute for Andrée Demay
Read by Janie Vanpée at the February 28, 2018 Faculty Meeting

that “[t]here is no panic whatever” and, regarding her students, that they “are not in a mood to expose themselves to danger.” But behind the assured and calm tone, perhaps Andrée Demay was reminded of the effects of the political turmoil she had witnessed during the

Second World War. Mary Ellen Birkett recalls traveling with her by train from Prague to an International Conference of Eighteenth-century Studies held in Budapest in 1987. At that time both Hungary and the Czech Republic were still behind the iron curtain. “The train was spare and uncomfortable; the view out the not-very-clean window was bleak. Not much activity nor a single billboard anywhere added color to the countryside. What upset Andrée even more than the drab, gray austere conditions was the presence of armed soldiers on the train. She said she felt she had been transported back to World War II; she shivered and then fell silent for the rest of the trip.

Perhaps this instance recalled the oppression and suffering she may have endured during WWII and explains why after the chaos of 1968, she never again wanted to direct the Program in Paris.

A warm and attentive colleague, Andrée Demay welcomed younger colleagues and enjoyed introducing them to the ways of New England, taking Martine Gantrel to the local Howard Johnsons to sample American fare, and Larry Joseph for walks in the New England woods.

In retirement Andrée travelled extensively, often attending scholarly conferences in her field and supporting her former students. She was an avid cook and a gardener. She developed a new interest in opera. Herself a musician, she continued her piano studies and particularly enjoyed playing her favorite Mozart. She wrote a detailed autobiography, which according to colleagues who have read it, is an enlightening chronicle of the many social changes that have taken place in France over nearly ten decades of history.

While Andrée’s preoccupations were decidedly intellectual, she was also a loyal supporter of local and worldwide social causes, among them organizations that helped girls in developing countries get an education.

Mademoiselle Demay made a difference in many young girls and women’s lives, including my own. She lives on in what she taught us.

[Thanks to Mary Ellen Birkett, Martine Gantrel, Larry Joseph, Felicia Leveille, colleagues who shared their memories of Andrée Demay with me; Jessica Zane and Marsha Mahdy, Andrée Demay’s care givers; and Amanda Carberry ’21, for contributing her research in the Sophia Smith Archives].