

Memorial Minute for Patricia Skarda
Read by Rick Millington at the October 22, 2014 Faculty Meeting

Patricia Skarda, Professor *emerita* of English, died on September 2, 2014; she was 68. Though Pat had struggled with serious illness for some time—though that illness had led, wrenchingly, to her decision to retire just before the fall term of 2013—her death surprised her friends and colleagues: retirement had seemed to bring with it a renewal of vigor and a return to the pleasures of ordinary life.

For our most devoted alumnae, we sometimes say, Smith becomes a kind of religion. When I think of Pat, and her forty year career here, I wish that phrase were more than metaphorical. I wish, this is to say, that there had been codes, and practices, and rituals—a nice baptismal dunking in the fountain near Burton Hall, say—that could have conferred upon her the status of Smith alumna: a status not merely honorary but actual, transubstantial . . . for there is no member of the faculty that I can think of who has been more deeply, more intimately devoted to this College and to the transformational possibilities it offers its students than she has.

Patricia Skarda arrived at Smith in the fall of 1973, having completed her Ph.D at the University of Texas; she did her undergraduate work at Sweet Briar College, where she was elected to Phi Beta Kappa, and at Texas Tech University, from which she graduated in 1969. With the exception of a year as Distinguished Visiting Professor at the United States Air Force Academy, she spent her entire career at Smith. Her doctoral dissertation was on the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, and, as the years unfolded, the scope of her scholarly writing expanded to include work on Mary Shelley, on Coleridge, on Wordsworth, on Hazlitt, on the Gothic, on an array of present-day writers, on questions of religious tolerance, on writers and artists who are Smith alumnae. Some highlights of this versatile career include a highly successful anthology of Gothic short

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fiction and poetry (co-edited with her Smith colleague Nora Crow) and a set of distinguished contributions to the MLA's indispensable "Approaches to Teaching" series. Less well known to her colleagues was Pat's still wider intellectual life, represented by the essays, reflections, and editorial work that emerged from Pat's deeply held Roman Catholic faith.

As a teacher, her range has been no less striking, and, over the years, her courses have been among our best known and most heavily enrolled. Her "Romantic Poetry and Prose" became a stop on almost every English major's intellectual itinerary, and her career as a teacher has been full of imaginativeness and invention: I'm thinking here of "The King James Bible and its Literary Heritage," of the brilliantly conceived "Telling and Retelling: Modern Novels based on Literary Antecedents," and of "Groves of Academe," her first-year seminar that introduced students to college by introducing them to college fiction. Pat's achievement as a teacher—felt deeply by her many students year in and year out—was acknowledged officially in 1986, when she won the College's Senior Teaching Award. The theme of devotion I have been striking is no less evident in her years of service to the College—she pretty much was Phi Beta Kappa at Smith—and in her mind-boggling contributions to alumnae relations: she undoubtedly will always hold the North American and World records for Smith Club lectures and alumnae engagement of all kinds.

We talk a lot, in our current academic lingo, about the 'synergy' between the curriculum and the co-curriculum. Pat was all over that one—well before it had a name—and no member of this faculty, I can claim with some confidence, has been more

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committed to and effective at teaching and nurturing the whole person—at doing the transformative work at the center of the liberal arts mission. For that reason, I'd like to close by quoting one of Pat's students—the Pulitzer prize-winning journalist and newly-minted Smith medalist Amy Nutt—who wrote to my colleague Nancy Bradbury on the occasion of Pat's retirement about what encountering Pat meant to her: “In the spring of 1974 I was a shy, nervous freshman when I sat down in Prof. Patricia L. Skarda's Romantic Poets course and quickly fell in love, not only with Keats, Shelley, Byron, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Blake—but with you, Pat. . . . As a professional writer and teacher of journalism, I have you to thank for so much of my success. What music I make with my own words is music that was learned first from you and from your beloved poets, and it is that music that continues to sustain me.” Her colleagues, friends, and students will feel deeply this loss, but, more deeply still, we will give thanks for that sustenance and celebrate that music.

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