

Memorial Minute for Margaret Shook (1931-2009)

Read by Bill Oram, October 28, 2009 Faculty Meeting

Margaret Shook, Professor Emerita of English, deeply learned and greatly gifted, witty, stubborn, and brave, died in her home at the Lathrop Retirement Community on April 28th of this year. She had found a happy life in her retirement, and leaves behind a sheaf of unpublished poems and stories, a novel, and 200 original crossword puzzles.

Peggy was born on February 27, 1931 in Prescott, Arizona, to Charles and Edna (Billingsly) Shook of Modesto, California. Charles was an itinerant Baptist preacher, and one of Peggy's poems creates a scene she must have been used to:

Gathered at the river in the sunrise,
Silver platter turning gold,
The cottonwoods tremble like sinners,
The white-clad children shuffle
A little dance in the cold

Old preacher man
Fisherman
Father; in boots to the thigh
Grabbles the children like catfish
Gasping as they rise
The Lord's trout, wet to the bone,
His chosen, His own.

By the time she was eighteen Peggy had gone through twenty-one schools, and read through many town libraries. She applied to Smith almost by chance, and came with so little knowledge of where she was going that she brought no warm clothes for the winter climate. While her poverty and her western origins separated her from most of her classmates, her teachers loved her. She graduated summa cum laude, sharing the prize for the best thesis in English with Ruth Mortimer, who would also return to Smith.

Peggy took a Fulbright at the University of London and went on to Berkeley for a Ph.D., writing a thesis on William Blake's prophetic poems. In 1960 she returned to teach at Smith until her retirement 36 years later. She had a profound knowledge of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and as her brilliant parodies attest, a wickedly accurate sense of literary cliché. She summarized the sentimental novel of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries by initials. Such novels, she said, always included a "BDH," a Beautiful Distressed Heroine," an "AY," or "Amiable Youth" and a "WMM or "Wicked Middle-Aged Marquis" (who has designs on the BDH). She was a kindly and generous colleague, especially to younger faculty members. Although she made deep and lasting friendships, her life at Smith was not always happy. In her retirement she wrote an animal alphabet book for her nieces in which the letter "S" tells how a spider, a sparrow, a snake and a scorpion try to reform the zoo. Their complaints become quarrels, and the colleagues eventually eat one another up. The poem ends with a moral.

Memorial Minute for Margaret Shook (1931-2009)

Read by Bill Oram, October 28, 2009 Faculty Meeting

Many personalities, however efficient and witty
Turn into violent enemies, when sitting on a committee.

A perfectionist, Peggy published little, and yet her mind was constantly at work—short stories, nursery rhymes, crossword puzzles, parodies, poems that she kept in various stages of revision, giving copies to friends. She once remarked that she didn't mind insomnia, because lying in bed she could tell herself stories. Late in her career she finished a gothic novel, *The Shades of Sunhill*, an elegant combination of ghost story and murder mystery, that becomes a compassionate analysis of a troubled marriage.

In her retirement, Peggy remarked to a friend that she had never been so happy. She started to watch film seriously; she learned to paint; and continued to write poetry. Much of that poetry is very good, and I'd like to close with a short poem that, like many, reworks classical materials. This one reimagines the story of Queen Niobe, who bragged that her seven sons and seven daughters made her greater than the goddess Latona. The goddess called on her children, Diana, the moon goddess and her brother Apollo, to revenge her and they slew the fourteen children with their arrows. In her grief Niobe became stone, a marble statue that continues to weep. Peggy's poem focuses on the tears.

NIOBE, NEAR THEBES

Niobe sat down by the water,
All day she bent over the stream,
Her two bare feet in the water,
Thinking of nothing but water.

It was not
Of the heavenly archers she thought,
But of water;
Of how clear and simple it is,
But how strange!
Always itself and still changing,
And silent, but making a music.
O wondrous, the moving of waters!
Noticing nothing but water,
If she saw,
It was only the stems of the grasses
Moving all one way in the current,
Rising and falling like arrows,
It was not
Of the weapons of slaughter she thought,
Or her little ones falling,

Only at night,
When her feet were stone cold
And the moon went up over the city,

Memorial Minute for Margaret Shook (1931-2009)

Read by Bill Oram, October 28, 2009 Faculty Meeting

When she noticed a shape in the water,
A glittering shape in the water,
Of a sudden she thought of a stone,

Niobe, thinking of water,
Weeping and thinking of water,
Of wondrous fallings of water,
Under the stony moon.