

Wellesley Classics Students and Faculty, 1921-1970: Muriel Morris Gardiner, Barbara Philippa McCarthy and Margaret Elizabeth Taylor

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As an undergraduate Latin major who also completed the equivalent of a major in Greek (back when the two ancient languages had not yet merged into a single department of Classics, requiring me to choose one or the other); and as a teacher and researcher specializing in both Greco-Roman antiquity and its “reception” (i.e., the re-envisioning of Greco-Roman ideas, texts and material objects by later times and cultures), it’s my pleasure and honor to share my research on a Wellesley classics student from the class of 1922, Helen Muriel Morris Gardiner (misspelled on the handout), and two members of the Wellesley classics faculty from 1929 through 1970: Barbara Philippa McCarthy, Ellen A. Kendall Professor of

Greek, and Margaret Elizabeth Taylor, Helen J. Sanborn

Professor of Latin. Immensely learned, charismatic thinkers and pedagogical presences, both “Miss McCarthy” and “Miss Taylor” inspired me, and other alums, not only to embrace classics as a vocation but also to help transform how, why, when, where, to whom, and by whom classics has been studied and taught.

Please feel free to contact me by email if you have questions about the copious material on my handout, the background for these brief remarks. I undertook the research on McCarthy and Taylor, recipients of PhDs in classics from Yale in 1929 and 1933 respectively, for a paper I

presented in the UK in 2013— now forthcoming in a volume of essays from Oxford University Press—entitled “Eli’s Daughters: Female Classics Graduate Students at Yale, 1892-1941”. Consequently I needed to situate their classics graduate training in a larger historical and academic context. In addition to explaining the term “Eli’s daughters” (by quoting the lyrics of Cole Porter’s fight song “Bull Dog”), I examined Yale’s longstanding reputation as an elite, masculinist environment less than hospitable to women, Jews, Roman Catholics and other minorities; as an undergraduate institution with educational priorities besides—and indeed other than—academic excellence; and as— notwithstanding the self-characterization of its Whiffenpoofs as “poor little lambs who have lost our way”, and in part through the rhyming collocation of “Yale” with “pale” and “male”—indelibly associated with our nation’s white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, expensively schooled, socially advantaged, establishment, which has wielded a strong conservative influence in business, politics and academia. Yale did not admit women to its undergraduate college until 1969. Nor did it hire— much less award tenure to—many female faculty in its co-educational professional schools (medicine, nursing, education, fine arts, law and drama) before then.

Yet Yale began to enroll women in its graduate school of arts and sciences in 1892. A decade earlier “sons of Eli” taught classics at the all-female Miss Porter’s School, where their pupils numbered Edith and Alice Hamilton, one to become a renowned author on Greco-Roman antiquity, the other a pioneering researcher in industrial medicine. By 1960, 36 women had received Yale PhDs in classics. Regrettably, even though the university has kept and published figures as well as certain facts about all of the women who earned doctorates there, the Yale Classics Department itself does not know the names of its three dozen female PhDs; I have only been able to identify five. Fortunately, one of them was my friend Hazel Barnes, who did her graduate work at Yale from 1937 through 1941, and later introduced French existentialist thought to the US through her translation of Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness*; I have drawn heavily on, and quoted heavily from, her 1997 autobiography.

Before entering Yale in 1927, Miss McCarthy attended Providence’s public, academically high-octane Classical High School; the women’s college at Brown; and the American School of Classical Studies in Athens (upon her departure from which she was awarded an MA from the University of Missouri without ever setting foot in that state). Although three years younger than

Miss Taylor, McCarthy raced through her PhD in only two years, several years before Taylor finished, and was hired at Wellesley first. From a working-class Irish family, McCarthy was the first American-born Roman Catholic on the Wellesley faculty, initially encountering visceral prejudices among its incurably Protestant powers-that-were. Her stellar Yale academic record was far stronger than that of all the men in her cohort (including a valued senior colleague of mine who enjoyed many more professional opportunities than ever came her way), with the exception of a Jewish contemporary later hired and fired by the Yale classics department, then drummed out of the profession for his left-wing activism. Worthy of mention, too, are her close family ties (she evidently chose Yale to share lodgings with her brother, then attending its law school: he later served as general legal counsel to the Tennessee Valley authority and sired the novelist Cormac McCarthy. Of note, too, was her success at overcoming doubts about her social suitability, achieved by her devotion to the college and its culture, and by such high-profile initiatives as the launching, in 1934, of annual Greek plays in which she herself performed: most memorably as a lower-class landlady in Aristophanes' *Frogs*, intoning Attic Greek in an Irish accent.

Miss Taylor hailed from an affluent, privileged but unconventional Anglo-Saxon Protestant background. Her grandfather was president of Vassar (from which she herself graduated in 1923); her own father, after graduating from Yale in 1896, headed for the western hills, becoming a bank president and timber company manager in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, where his daughter grew up and later taught Latin. Like Hazel Barnes, Taylor shared her bed, and life, with another woman, Katherine Balderston of the English Department, although the two could not openly acknowledge their relationship as a couple. What struck me most powerfully about both McCarthy and Taylor is that neither produced very much in the way of published scholarship (in contrast to my Wellesley professors trained at Bryn Mawr, Chicago, Columbia and Harvard), and that the little they did write was—unlike the two of them—deadly dull. Hazel Barnes' memoir helps illuminate this paradox, celebrating the changes wrought in classical scholarship since her Yale graduate school years, some of it feminist work by Wellesley BAs and Yale PhDs.

Finally, Muriel Gardiner. She was Jewish by birth, like the American playwright Lillian Hellman, whose reminiscences in her 1973 book *Pentimento* present a highly fictionalized version of Gardiner's life during the 1930s. In its pages Hellmann (who never actually met Gardiner) claims to

have smuggled money for Jewish refugees in Nazi-occupied Vienna to and through an American woman psychiatrist closely resembling Gardiner in multiple details, whom Hellman calls “Julia”. A 1977 movie by that name immortalized Hellman’s story on the silver screen, with Vanessa Redgrave in the title role and Jane Fonda as Hellmann. Redgrave won an Academy Award for her performance, utilizing the occasion to protest on behalf of the Palestinian cause.

In the late 1920’s, Gardiner moved to Vienna for medical training, hoping to be psychoanalyzed by Sigmund Freud’s daughter. While residing there she married an Austrian political resistance leader, Joseph Buttinger, and did save many Jewish and other lives. But at Wellesley College, in addition to heading the Liberal Club, Gardiner studied classics. She attended the American Academy in Rome after her graduation, and then spent months travelling in Greece. Indeed, Gardiner only turned to medicine after an abortive, personally devastating academic experience while doing a B. Litt degree at Oxford: on Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley’s rewriting of the ancient Greek Prometheus legend as the novel *Frankenstein*. Her autobiography relates that her oral examination committee, consisting of two clergymen and “a woman of obviously rigid mind”, only asked her questions about “her moral and religious attitudes as expressed in her thesis”, and failed her for “nowhere stating that she condemned suicide”.

Materials from the Wellesley College archive highlight the different ways in which Gardiner was identified and identified with classical antiquity as an undergraduate. An article speculating on her future career predicted she would write a book entitled *From Cicero to 1932*. She also wrote Greek inspired verses, collected together with those of Katharine Lee Bates and other Wellesley women. My handout concludes with the text of a sonnet Gardiner wrote to the Greek pastoral poet Theocritus, praising the “liberal vision” his poetry offered for those of her generation who shared her political aspirations.

The photograph of Muriel Morris Gardner is on the wall of Diana Chapman Walsh Alumnae Hall with other recipients of the Alumnae Achievement Award.