

MUSIC, POETRY, AND PHILOLOGY

Three Strands of a Braid

Marie Borroff

Where to begin?

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It has to begin with music, because I was born into a musical family. My mother started out in life, in accordance with her father's wishes, as a concert pianist, but fell in love with my father and became secretly engaged to him. They married after her father's death in middle age. She had never, at heart, been interested in pursuing a musical career, but she loved to play and had a natural facility—I could almost say virtuosity. She always, always played the piano in our home. Every day when we were very small, she would seat my sister and me on the shelves on either side of the keyboard and play songs from collections she had, while we sang to her accompaniment. We also took piano lessons, starting at age four. So I grew up thinking that music might well be it. But I also wrote poems as a child, probably in part because my sister and I were always given books of poems, by my father, especially. He was a traveling salesman, and every time he'd come back from one of his trips through New England, he would bring books. Where he found them, I don't know, but in whatever little town he went to, he must have tracked down a bookstore. And some of the books he brought back were books of poems, not necessarily written for children. I still have one of them, *The New Yorker Anthology of Verse*. So I read poetry from a very early time in my life, and I had plenty of encouragement in the writing of poems from both my father and my mother.

I went on writing poetry, and I went on playing the piano, and I graduated from high school, and after that I spent a year in New York City, where my family was liv-

Marie Borroff was born in 1923 and spent her early life in Rockville Centre, Long Island, and New York City. In her teens, she had thoughts of a musical career but went instead to the University of Chicago, where she received a Ph.B. in 1943 and an M.A. in comparative literature in 1946. She enrolled in 1952 at Yale in a program combining English literature with philology, and received the degree in 1956. The subject of her dissertation was the great medieval poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. After studying several twentieth-century poets for a year on an American Association of University Women fellowship, she returned to Smith College, where she had taught earlier. In 1957-1958 she commuted between Smith and Yale, where she taught a graduate course in Renaissance English. In 1959 she came to Yale as a visiting associate professor of English. She became an associate professor in 1960, was tenured and promoted in the 1960s, and was appointed William Lampson Professor of English in 1971 and Sterling Professor in 1991. She retired in 1994. Her books are "*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*": *A Stylistic and Metrical Study* (Yale University Press, 1963), *Language and the Poet: Verbal Artistry in Frost, Stevens, and Moore* (University of Chicago Press, 1979), *Stars and Other Signs* (poems, Yale, 2002), *Traditions and Renewals* (essays, Yale, 2003), and translations of the works of the Gawain-poet: *Sir Gawain, Patience, and Pearl* (Norton, 2001) and *Cleanness and St. Erkenwald* (Norton, forthcoming). Her lifelong interests as a teacher and writer have been in the poetry of language and the language of poetry.

ing. When I was in my teens, I gave what was called an “artist’s recital” at the studio of my then teacher, Harold Henry, who had been something of a concert pianist himself. Then I went and studied for a year in Chicago, at the American Conservatory of Music, where my mother had studied as a girl, thinking that maybe I would go on and become a professional musician. But it didn’t work. I didn’t have enough *Sitzfleisch* (literally, “sit-flesh”) to become a concert pianist. Somehow, the keyboard and the music stand seemed a limit, a barrier, rather than a window through which I could look out onto something else.

Rather than going on with music, I decided to enroll at the University of Chicago, which had a program of studies I liked the sound of. And there I had great good luck. I have had a series of very, very lucky happenstances all through my life, and that was certainly one of the most important. Someone I knew had said, in passing, “You have to take Maclean.” He meant Norman Maclean, the man who many years later would write a book that would become a classic, called *A River Runs through It*. He taught a course in how to read poems, a course in lyric poetry, and I took that course on the advice of this person I knew. I learned from Norman Maclean that there were things you could see, and things you could respond to, in lines of poetry that I had never dreamed of. My high school English teacher’s idea of teaching poetry was to read aloud in an exaggeratedly melodramatic way from Tennyson and Browning. There’s a poem by Browning in which the name *Calais* is followed by the rhyming word *malice*, and of course has to be anglicized accordingly. My teacher pronounced Calais in the French way, and I squirmed with embarrassment.

Norman Maclean was a wonderful teacher and became a wonderful friend. I stopped writing poetry for two years after I had taken his course, because I realized that all the wistful adolescent poems I had written – some of which I had sent to Edna St. Vincent Millay, who never wrote back – were trash. Eventually, I began writing poems again, very, very cautiously. And something of that caution persisted with me as a poet for a long time.

At that time, Robert Maynard Hutchins was president of the University of Chicago. He believed that every citizen should have a bachelor’s degree in liberal arts that would take two years of study after high school. That’s why I have this strange item in my vita: I got a Ph.B. at Chicago in 1943. In the Ph.B. program, you studied for two years, taking a number of required courses, including survey courses in the humanities, the biological sciences, and the social sciences. After you got the two-year bachelor’s degree, you could go on for three more years and get a master’s degree in an elected field of study. The university’s Blue Book listed a program run by something called the Committee on Comparative Studies in Literature and the Arts – a comp. lit. major. Norman Maclean was on the committee, and so was R.S. Crane, a great scholar and, like Maclean, a wonderful teacher. I took his famous course on Aristotle’s *Poetics*, where you read a paragraph a week and wrote a two-page paper on it. Crane began giving me back my papers with C’s and C pluses on them. I was absolutely

horrified, because I had never seen such a grade in my entire life. But eventually I was able to do better.

What I decided to do in working for my master's degree was to study lyric poetry, which I read mostly in English, less in French, and still less in German. In French, I took the courses in *explication de texte* taught by the formidable Prof. Robert Vigneron. I also had tutorial sessions with Prof. Helena Gamer of the German Department. In these, I read German poems aloud, and she corrected my pronunciation.

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During the three years I spent getting an M.A. in comparative literature, I didn't have the faintest idea that I would ever be interested in anything called Middle English, let alone Old English. I did take one course in the history of the English language. The professor who taught it was named Hulbert, and I remember thinking that it was the dullest subject I had ever studied. I had no appreciation of it at all; that awakening lay far in the future.

After getting my master's, I stayed in Chicago for a while, and then spent a year abroad. Returning home and needing to support myself, I looked to the academy and landed a three-year job teaching at Smith College as an assistant professor of English. There, of course, all the students and a majority of the faculty were women. After I had taught freshman composition there for a year, I was also given a course in creative writing. One of the assignments I was supposed to include was an imitation of style. Each student was to take some author who wrote in a distinctive way and whose work they knew and liked, and try to write something in the style of that author. All my students began asking me questions: What is style? How do we go about imitating it? What should we look for when we read an author to help us write an imitation? I had some ideas about this that seemed right. I felt that one thing you would do would be to use the kinds of words your author used. There were long words and short words, simple words and fancy words, good old Anglo-Saxon words and words from French and words from Latin. But I couldn't find any essays on style that talked about this aspect of it. Finally, I decided to write something myself.

I had been trained at Chicago never to say anything general without immediately providing an example. So, when I wanted to say something about good old simple Anglo-Saxon words, I thought, "Well, now, what's a good old Anglo-Saxon word? Here's the dictionary. I'll think of one and look it up." But what I found was that the good old words I thought must be Anglo-Saxon weren't necessarily Anglo-Saxon at all. And there were funny things in the etymologies that I didn't understand, like asterisks and abbreviations like "Gmc." Gmc. probably meant "Germanic," but what was Germanic? The more I tried to find words that would illustrate what I assumed were correlations between sources such as Anglo-Saxon and Latin, and stylistic values such as simplicity and ornateness, the more I realized that I didn't know what I was talking about. I didn't know what the English language was. I didn't know its history, or how words from different languages found their way into it, or how their distinctive stylistic values could be explained. And more and more, I wanted to find out.

I resigned from Smith and spent a year in New York trying to figure out what I wanted to do for the rest of my life. At that point, I was helping myself along financially by working as an accompanist for teachers of singing and ballet, as well as writing some poems. I had vague ideas of getting a job on the editorial staff of a magazine or publishing house. That was how I would make my living, but what I would really do was to write poetry. I looked for such a job in a somewhat disorganized fashion, but nothing turned up. So I wrote R.S. Crane in Chicago, with whom I had corresponded since I left, and told him about the project that had come out of my teaching of creative writing at Smith. I said I wanted to study the way the history of words in English correlated with their stylistic values, and I wanted to be able to write about how facts about language in an author's writings contributed to the stylistic qualities of his language. I wanted to build a bridge between the factual and the impressionistic, between quantities and qualities. Crane wrote back and said he thought that was a good idea. "There is a man at Yale University who I think is doing the kind of thing that interests you," he said. "His name is Helge Kökeritz, and he is writing about Shakespeare. I think you should go to New Haven and see him, and talk about perhaps coming to Yale to study."

So I took the train from New York to New Haven and went to Davenport College, where Kökeritz lived. We had lunch and he talked about the book he was writing, about how English was pronounced on Shakespeare's stage. He said that if I wanted to come to Yale and study with him, I should begin by learning Old English, which was what they called Anglo-Saxon at Yale. I could study Old English in the summer before I came, and I should write someone named Francis Magoun at Harvard and ask his advice. He said nothing about a man named John Pope, whom I would discover later, when I came to Yale. I wrote to Francis Magoun, and though he wrote back, he didn't seem interested in me at all, but I remember that he gave me the name of a textbook I should buy and study. Kökeritz also told me that there was a graduate program at Yale in which you studied both English literature and English philology. I thought that seemed like a very good idea, so I applied for admission. Years later, I discovered that no one but me had ever enrolled in the program. I think it was there because Kökeritz wanted it, to encourage people to study philology. But of course, I didn't know that.

In the fall of 1952, I came to Yale, having a bought a book on Anglo-Saxon grammar and studied it during the summer, though of course I hadn't learned the language. The director of graduate studies in English that fall was John Pope. I remember going in to see him and telling him about my summer study. He said, "Well, I think you'd better take the Old English course." So of course I enrolled in Old English, which was a requirement for all first-year graduate students and which was taught by Pope. What happened was that I came to Yale to study with Helge Kökeritz, and I did study with him, but I also had the great good fortune of finding John Pope and Talbot Donaldson. Donaldson taught Chaucer, and Pope taught both the introductory course in Old English and an advanced course. I took all three.

Those two great scholars and teachers were more important in my life as a graduate student than Helge Kökeritz, though Kökeritz codirected my dissertation. When I began to study philology that year, something strange and unexpected happened to me: when I opened that book about Anglo-Saxon (or Old English) and saw, for example, that there were in Old English seven classes of strong verbs, my heart was filled with joy. I thought, how wonderful that there should be seven classes of strong verbs in Old English. I loved their different phonetic shapes and was fascinated by the relationships I could see between old and modern forms. From the beginning, I found an intellectual home in that material, and fortunately I have never lost the pleasure I first took in it. It never occurred to me that everybody else didn't feel the same way. I found it very strange that there were students in the Old English class who thought it was a bore and a chore. At that time, all students had to take "a year of Kökeritz" as well as a year of Old English, and this was unfortunate, because I soon discovered that Kökeritz couldn't teach. He was very learned and very nice, and he would do his best to explain things, but if you were puzzled about something and he explained it, you understood it less afterward than you had when he began to talk about it. But my love for the subject – in my first year, he taught a course in Old English dialects – made up for these difficulties. All in all, I reveled in my first year of graduate study. This was a world that I loved, that I wanted to know more – and more – about. I felt completely at home in it, and I was beginning to learn what I had hoped to learn before I came.

But where was poetry in all this, and how was I going to choose a subject for my dissertation? When the time came for these questions to be answered, I went to see John Pope in his office in the basement of Silliman College, and said, "Mr. Pope, I want to write a dissertation. Can you make any suggestions about a subject?" And he said, "What sort of thing do you want to do?" I said, "I'd like to write about a poet, a medieval English poet, who used language in a powerfully expressive way. I'd like to study the effects of his language and the features that produced them." I don't know how many of you knew John, but if you did, you know that sometimes when you asked him a question, he would sort of submerge as if he were going under water, and then eventually he'd arise with an answer. You got so you knew you just had to wait it out; you never said anything until he had resurfaced and said whatever he was going to say. I waited and waited, and finally John came back up and beamed at me and said, "Why don't you do something with *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*?" And I said "What is *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*?" – a question that seems very strange to me now. He told me that it was a wonderful poem that had been written about the same time as the poetry of Chaucer, but in a different area of England, and therefore in a different dialect, using a vocabulary that was quite different from Chaucer's. On the way home, I stopped at the Co-op and bought a copy of it. I began reading it that evening and writing a list of the words that I didn't know.

I did, indeed, write a dissertation on *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. There my two great loves, poetry and language, came together, because the poem was a master-

piece of narration and description. At that time, hard though this is to believe today, only one book had ever been written about it—in English, that is. It was a book on the hunting scenes; its author's name, I remember, was Henry Lyttleton Savage. There were, however, a number of studies of the poem in German. I had to read them, and much of what they had to say about the language of the poem, I am sorry to tell you, was more than a little pedantic. I remember that one of them was an exhaustive study of the adjectives in the poem. The problem was that if you wanted to check the author's findings on any particular adjective, you had to have learned his system of classification, because he divided them up according to semantic domains such as nature, culture, religion, and so on, and did not provide a general index. First you had to figure out where a given adjective belonged, and only then could you find it in the book.

Among these German studies, however, was a short monograph by a man named August Brink. There I found a really valuable and fruitful principle for discriminating among words of different stylistic values. It had to do with their metrical position in the long alliterating lines that make up most of *Sir Gawain*. I took that lead and went on to write a study of the style of the poem. I also undertook a rather ill-fated metrical study, because I had been very much taken with John Pope's musical analysis of the metrical structure of *Beowulf*, which I thought then, and still think, is right on target. My idea was to do the same sort of thing with *Sir Gawain*—that is, I was going to write the metrical patterns in musical notation. The trouble was that the patterns of the late Middle English alliterating line are far more complicated than those of *Beowulf* and other Old English alliterative poems. There are more syllables, more unstressed syllables in particular, and as a result the line runs more rapidly. If you wanted to express its rhythms musically, you would have to use sixteenth notes and even thirty-second notes, not just the half-notes, quarter-notes, and eighth-notes that suffice for Old English verse. So that didn't work, and when I revised the metrical part of the study later, I analyzed the line in terms of stress-values, not musical ones.

So that was the way my acquaintance with the *Gawain*-poet began: I sort of backed into the medieval period. Even though I've written a lot about the *Gawain*-poet, and have taught and written about Chaucer, I've never thought of myself as a medievalist. I learned what I had to learn about the medieval period in order to write what I wanted to write: I read to acquire the necessary background for my work, not to gain a comprehensive knowledge of the field. Fortunately for me, the Yale English Department liked—and, I think, still likes—people to do more than one thing. That was a great break for me, because it was fine with them if I also wanted to write about, and teach, twentieth-century poetry, which I did. I had begun writing a set of studies of the poetry of Wallace Stevens, Marianne Moore, and Robert Frost immediately after getting my Ph.D. and before taking my second job, which was also at Smith. I taught there twice, once before I studied at Yale and once afterward. At the time when I looked for a second job, only males were on the faculty of Yale College, or of any other college for men. A woman with a Ph.D., no matter how good her record,

could expect to be offered jobs only at women's colleges. So when I was job hunting, I interviewed at Bryn Mawr, Wellesley, and Connecticut College, as well as Smith. I returned to Smith because I knew the country and liked it, and I still had friends there.

One day, I think it was during my second year at Smith, I had a telephone call from Helge Kökeritz, who sounded quite excited and told me he thought the Yale English Department was interested in hiring me. I think the reason they wanted me was that at that time, courses in philology were still very important in the doctoral program, and were still required. Kökeritz was not well and they wanted somebody who could teach courses in philology, and, I have to add, teach them effectively: someone who could communicate the subject matter. As I've said, Helge's gifts in that direction were not great. When I came to Yale, I taught the history of the English language in alternation with a course in twentieth-century poetry. I also taught Chaucer at the graduate level, and graduate and undergraduate seminars in the style of the *Gawain-poet*, and had an absolutely wonderful time.

Then something else happened. It occurred to me—in fact, I can remember the precise moment—that I could write a verse translation of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* that would be more like the original, and more effective poetically, than the other translations that were in print. I felt that I could do that because I had found, in studying the language of the original, that it was more like modern English than the language of Chaucer's poetry in certain respects bearing on metrical form. As a result, it would be possible to replicate, not just approximate, the patterns and momentum of the original lines. Of course, I had been writing verse almost all my life, so I had the craft. I started translating the poem and the next thing I knew, I had finished it. I showed it to Talbot Donaldson, who was the editor of the medieval section of the *Norton Anthology of English Literature*, and he thought Norton would publish it, both separately and as part of the anthology. Which they did.

Several years later, Talbot and I had dinner together, and he said he thought I ought to translate *Pearl*, another poem by the *Gawain-poet*. Though *Pearl* was undoubtedly written by the same poet, it is very different metrically. It is not written in the long alliterative line, but in short rhyming lines in stanzas of twelve lines rhyming ABABABABBCBC, with four A-rhymes and six B-lines per stanza. I said, "Talbot, I'm sorry, but *Pearl* cannot be translated successfully into modern English; there are just too many rhymes." (The poet could achieve his rhymes in ways no longer permissible—for example, by accenting the suffixes of words derived from French.) Talbot accepted this answer, but the request stuck in my mind. Finally, I thought to myself, well, I'll see what I can do with the first stanza. The next thing I knew, I had achieved quite a good translation with the help of some inexact rhymes—what are called "slant" rhymes and "eye" rhymes. I was hooked. Four years later, I reached the one hundred and first, and final, stanza of *Pearl*, and Norton published my translation. By now, I've translated all four of the poems the *Gawain-poet* is thought to have

written, plus a fifth poem of disputed authorship that I think is also his. The whole enterprise has been exciting and rewarding and quite wonderful.

So that's my story. Poetry, music, and the history of the language – all my interests and kinds of expertise have come together, to my great good fortune.

Questions and Answers

Q. Can you say something more about the importance of your musical training in relation to your work as a poet and critic of poetry?

MB. I think my training as a musician has given me a greater understanding of the rhythmical side of poetry – the temporal values of the syllables that are inseparable from the stress-values. I sometimes say that songs are poems set to music, but in a memorable poem, the words *are* the music. Helge Kökeritz, whom I came to Yale to study with, was one of those linguists who refuse to admit the temporal element in poetic language because it is not “in” the words themselves. He used to say to me, “Marie, you are a musician, and that is fine, just fine. But I can assure you that there is no point in analyzing poetry in musical terms.” But that's not true.

Q. What kind of music do you like to play?

MB. I have to say that I much prefer tonal music, but given tonality, I have no particular likes and dislikes. I like to play Mozart; I play some Bach, some Beethoven, some Chopin, some Poulenc. I have a large collection of piano music that I acquired partly as a result of working as a pianist at a dance camp, where I had to play all kinds of pieces. I do some sight-reading and some practicing. Right now, I'm sight-reading my way through the Mendelssohn *Songs without Words*, and I'm practicing a Haydn sonata that I heard on public radio and liked, so I looked it up and bought it. My playing is eclectic, but limited to music written in traditional harmonies.

Q. You seemed to be saying, somewhere in the middle of your talk, that as a scholar you did what you had to do. It sounded as if you meant, “I had to pay my dues by doing this and doing that, and then I could do what I want.”

MB. I don't quite remember it that way. I've had to make a living; that's always been true. I suppose I had to publish, but that was never a problem because there were always things I wanted to say. Of course, the academic world gives you summers and two-week vacations and sabbaticals when you have some time to play the piano and write a few poems. Looking back, I can honestly say that during my years at Yale, I did what I wanted to do: I taught what I wanted to teach and wrote what I wanted to write. I had a great time.

Q. Was that in any way related to the particular department you were in?

MB. Indeed, yes. I'm glad you said that, because I've known other women in other departments whose experience has not been happy at all. It is true, as I said, that I came to Yale to find Helge Kökeritz, and found John Pope and Talbot Donaldson. But the other male professors in the department were wonderfully supportive of me. I was very lucky in that respect. One of my eminent colleagues had taught a course that I was then given to teach. During a conversation he and I had, he said, “You know, one

of your students whom I also know came to me and was going on and on about your course and how great it was. Finally he asked me, ‘Why haven’t they given it before?’” Then this colleague looked at me without smiling and said, “It’s a good thing I have no pride.” That’s the kind of treatment I received. From what I’ve heard about some other departments, that would have been a signal to kick this person out, or see that she didn’t get promoted. So, I had great luck. The English department was a wonderful intellectual home for me.

Q. In what year did you first teach at Yale?

MB. I came as a visiting professor in 1959, on the understanding that I would teach only one course and have no committee assignments. I had received my doctorate three years before and had put the manuscript of my dissertation into a drawer and forgotten all about it. If Yale hadn’t given me the nod, that’s where it would still be, I’m sure. Shortly before I left Smith, they offered me the position of dean. But I never wanted to be the dean of anything. Anyway, when I came to Yale it was agreed that I would revise my dissertation and that if Yale University Press accepted it for publication, they could hire me. I did come to Yale and teach that course, and I did revise my dissertation during that academic year, and the press did accept it. So in 1960, I began to teach as a regular member of the faculty. I had a five-year associate professorship, but in a year or two I was offered a college presidency, and the department tenured me.

Q. Can I ask a question about the trajectory side of your own work? You seem to have discovered what you were interested in very early on and continued working within the frame of your university education, and then your first years of teaching. To what extent did your ideas about poetry and philology change over time?

MB. My interest in philology came late and unexpectedly. It happened when I got to Yale as a graduate student: I just fell in love with the whole field, the history of the language and all the data connected therewith. As for poetry, I’d say my ideas about it have enlarged more than they have changed. When I was first teaching at Smith, I directed the senior essay of a brilliant girl named Janice Elwood, who later married a poet named Kenneth Koch. Through my work with her, I discovered Wallace Stevens, whose poetry I had never read before. And I immediately saw that here was something really, really important. I’ve certainly widened my scope, and I’m sure there’s a lot of wonderful and innovative poetry that I haven’t read yet but might discover and enjoy some day. I’m thinking about Robert Frost’s lines: “They would not find him changed from him they knew, / Only more sure of what he thought was true.”

Q. But that’s also a judgment about poetry in general, about the field – that nothing in the field has changed or evolved, or was of such significance that you felt you had to incorporate it.

MB. Poets find new ways of writing poetry, and I was able to enlarge my scope of appreciation, let’s say, by learning to read and value William Carlos Williams, whom I hadn’t known before and who wrote in a different way, did different things with the look of the poem on the page and the kinds of experience represented by the lan-

guage of the poem. I think my family background did something for me, in that my sister and I were brought up to like all kinds of music: ragtime, jazz, popular songs, Stephen Foster, Mozart, Bach, whatever. For me, that kind of eclecticism transferred to poetry. By that I mean liking Edward Lear and Ogden Nash as well as the serious canonical poets. I don't care what kind of effect the poem has, whether it's humorous or serious, or profound or trivial, or whatever it is, as long as words are put together in a way that gives me pleasure I haven't experienced before. That's where I want to be. That's what I want to be reading. There are an infinite number of ways in which that's possible.

My own poetry has always been very traditional in form: I've always written in meter and rhyme. As I said a while ago, when I first started writing poems again after taking Norman Maclean's course, I wrote very carefully, and perhaps too carefully. I remember that years ago I showed some poems to Maynard Mack, who was always very supportive of that side of me. He wrote back a wonderful note in which he said, among other things, that perhaps I was allowing the forms to exert too great a pressure on the emotions I was trying to express. "But," he said, "I can always see the fire glowing behind the bars." As I went on writing poems, I tried to make the forms allow me more freedom. Gradually, I got better at it, but I wrote just a few poems from year to year. Eventually, I'm happy to say, Yale University Press published a volume of them – but that will be the one and only volume of my poems.

Q. Can I ask, from your standpoint as a translator, by what standards should the translation of a poem be judged?

MB. I'm smiling because that question has so many answers, and I think the answer depends on the particular case. What, for instance, is the relation between the original language of the poem and the language into which it is being translated? How like or unlike are they? Then, what is the potential interest or value of the poem for the culture in which it's being made available? I really think that the *Gawain*-poet gave me an unusual opportunity, because the two languages are in a sense the same: I'm translating from English into English, and it turns out to be possible in modern English to do many of the same kinds of things with words that the *Gawain*-poet did. He taps one important vein of the language in particular, in that he writes alliterative verse, verse in which lines are built out of linkages between words beginning with the same consonant. The kind of verse he writes involves a great deal of sound-symbolism, mimetic or other expressive effects achieved partly through the sounds of the words. Whether or not we are consciously aware of it, sound symbolism is alive and well in our language at every level. For that reason, it's possible to achieve not necessarily the same but equivalent effects in modern English. There's a wonderful passage in the poet's retelling of the story of Jonah in which he describes the departure of the ship from the harbor. The mariners turn the ship until the wind is astern; it fills the sail, and "sweeps their sweet ship for them swift from the harbor." The *sw* combinations at the beginning of three important words – we find them also in *wish*, *swoop*, and *swirl* – have a sound-symbolic expressiveness that is essential to the effect

of the line. So I think it's possible to write modern English verse-translations that are very much like the *Gawain*-poet's originals. I know that W.S. Merwin, a fine poet, has also translated *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* into modern verse, but I have to say that when I read it I seem to be reading a poem by W.S. Merwin, not a poem by the *Gawain*-poet.

Q. What was life like at Yale for women faculty when you first taught here?

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MB. There was a cartoon in the *New Yorker* several years ago that showed an exhausted man clambering up to the summit of a mountain. A man standing on the summit looks down at him and says, "You're the first white man to climb this peak. I'm part Indian." That's how I always feel about being described as the first woman to teach at Yale. To be precise, I was the first woman to teach at Yale in the Department of English in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences. That same year, Mary Wright—Mrs. Arthur Wright—similarly coeducated the Department of History. The School of Nursing, and perhaps also the School of Drama, had had women on their faculties before that. At any rate, I knew I was an exception, but somehow most of the time I was pretty much oblivious to that fact. I suppose I was leading the life of the mind, and I was preparing my classes and trying to go forward with my scholarly writing, and the classes were very exciting places where intense intellectual encounters took place between me and the kind of top-quality undergraduates you teach at Yale. My "difference" wasn't brought to my attention very often. I never felt, when I was standing in front of a class of men, that I was . . . standing in front of a class of men, strange as that may sound. They were the students and I was the teacher. Of course, I occasionally was made aware of limitations. I remember that early in my stay at Yale, Helge Kökeritz said to me, "But Marie, what are we going to do about you? You know, there are no women in the college fellowships." It never occurred to him that that could change. It is true that in my first years at Yale, the administration decreed into existence, as a way of bypassing the problem, something called the Fellowship of Helen Hadley Hall, composed entirely of women. We met at Helen Hadley Hall and ate from paper plates, with plastic spoons and forks and paper napkins. Not the finest building on campus, shall we say, but I met some wonderful women in that group, including Mary Griswold and Mary Wright. Also, we were given money enough to invite a series of well-known women to visit. Anna Freud came, Lillian Hellman came, Santha Rama Rau came. So there was a lot that was positive about the fellowship. And yet, as I used to say, we were "separate but unequal." When John Hersey became a college master, he was the one that got the Council of Masters to agree to have the colleges decide individually whether or not they wanted to coeducate.

Q. In what year was that?

MB. Probably in 1963 or 1964. Ezra Stiles College, whose master was Richard Sewall of the English Department, voted yes, and I joined the fellowship there, where I later met Lorraine Siggins and Dorothee Metlitzki. That was another pleasurable aspect of life at Yale for me.