MARY VIRGINIA HEINLEIN
l903 - 1961

Mary Virginia Heinlein was born in 1903 in Bridgeport, Ohio. She must have liked her town. She insisted on going to its public schools, against the preference of her family for private ones. Years later she could bring generations of Bridgeport people alive for us with her reminiscences. Or one might hear her and an old neighbor from home telling over with relish all the institutions of higher learning in their native state. Perhaps these steady ties with the place she first knew had a share in her passion for authenticity, in the richness and substance of her experience of the wide world.

It was in Bridgeport that the theatre took hold of her. She saw all the plays that Chautauqua on its circuit and stock companies on their tours brought to her part of the Ohio Valley; and early in life she began to find her way backstage to talk with the players. For her own part, this theatre-goer, who was also getting to be well-read, initiated her playmates into many dramatic ventures.

So, when she came to Vassar College in l923 to enter the Junior class, after two years at Ohio State University, it was natural that her teacher, Winifred Smith, should be struck by her intuitive and vivid understanding of Elizabethan drama, unusual in students then or now; by her quick response even to the old-fashioned Elizabethan humor and comedy, which she could interpret in the medium of American rural dialect and slang.

At Vassar, she chose some of the courses that Vassar Alumnae are still talking about. One of them was Henry Nobel MacCracken's Chaucer and the Early Renaissance. Her teacher must have seen her then as he saw her long after. The other day Mr. MacCracken wrote: "The chief quality of Mary Virginia Heinlein - my student, colleague, director, and friend — was dedication to the very point of possession. For two-score years I never ceased to wonder at its intensity."

It was not the Vassar actors but the debaters whom she joined as a student. Mr. MacCracken remembers this, too: "An obscure member (as we often let a transfer be) of a brilliant class, with no toehold in her glass mountain, she climbed to the presidency of Debate Council, then the most favored of college sports In the fall of 1925 she led her team against one from Cambridge University, whose most notable member was Richard Austin Butler (now Great Britain's Home Secretary). The issue was: Resolved that modern democracies are not compatible with personal liberty

The judges‘ award went to the English. But Mr. MacCracken thought they found it a hollow award: "They had come to win converts not debates; and the Vassar audience voted solidly for Mary Virginia's side."

From Vassar Miss Heinlein went straight to the Theater Guild

School of New York. The next six years she spent in the theatre, studying in this country and in Europe, acting in New York and in travelling companies, trying her hand at directing - managing. In these years she was deeply influenced by the psychological exploration of the experimental dramatists of the twenties; and this became one of her continuing and developing interests.

Then came the lean years of the thirties. She went home to Ohio, into her father's law office, and the law school of the State University. But the fine career in the law, and perhaps in the State Legislature, that her Vassar teachers and friends began now to predict for her barely got under way. In l933 Sarah Lawrence College offered her an opportunity that she could not resist: to introduce drama into its liberal arts curriculum. It is hard for Vassar people to remember how radical and rare such an opportunity was in those days because Vassar's own pioneering in the Arts began early. For twenty years in our own Department of English, students had been tak-ing courses in playwriting and play production, and putting their learning to the test, first in the campus dramatic work-shop, then in the Poughkeepsie Community Theatre and finally in the Experimental Theatre. By the time Miss Heinlein returned to Vassar the Division of Drama had been established. She came in 1942 as Professor of Drama and Director of the Experimental Theatre.

She brought with her a clear vision of what the education of women should be, and of the place of the arts in this education Her own words give the best statement of her goals as a teacher

Our teaching philosophy is sensible and simple.
We believe that a student's status is a dignified one, comparable to a profession, and that the student's chief business is learning. Since all things change and man's wisdom is finite, the important thing for the student to learn is hpw to learn so that her experience here may be the start of an ever continuing process of self-education.
We teach, therefore, techniques of learning and hope the student acquires the taste for constant exploration.

Our goal is the student's independence of us, an independence based on the genuine confidence which comes from knowing that one has a reasonable under-standing of oneself and the ability to do useful work, and on her realization that final responsibility for her education as well as for her direction in life rests upon herself alone.
We believe, also, that for some individuals the practice of an art is an integrating and truly educating process,

demanding, as it does, the involvement of the whole personality and the constant searching and testing of oneself, and calling at the same time for the utmost flexibility, originality, and spontaneity, and the most rigorous self-discipline, organization, and order. We believe that drama furnishes proper substance for the students' meditation, dealing, as it does, with the most important question affecting man, the meaning of his own existence; and that it presents to the mind, as do the myths, rites and dreams from which it comes those symbols and images the contemplation of which leads the human spirit toward its true and proper development.

This is not a definition of permissive teaching, and Miss Heinlein's students did not have an easy time of it. "She behaved," one of them says, "As if our naivete were a fault we could shed if we chose; and she chose that we get rid of it fast." A young woman might kick hard against the pricks - hard enough for all to see. But ten years later she would write that Miss Heinlein was her great teacher, the first person she had ever known who showed "intellectual passion." She would say that in having to submit to the "authority of accuracy and precision"; to subject the development of her ideas to the rigor of logic, to suffer the explorations of her own mind, she was getting her introduction to "a great science, in the fine old Greek sense of the word."

We all had a share in Miss Heinlein's educational enterprise, evenififlfie of us who never appeared on her stage, or lent the resources and insights of their own professions to her productions. We were her audience, whom she made feel as essential to the theatre, between curtain-up and curtain-down, as her cast. Some of us had to take it on faith, now and then, that the play before us was, in her words, "so good that it needed doing." But in the end every one of us had his own treasury of satisfying memories of her theatre; perhaps the power and the insights in her production of The Tempest; perhaps the

sights and sounds of young women, so moving, against the stylized sets of The Mother of Us All; perhaps the perfection of The Blood Wedding, that "brooding folkplay of simple peasants, devoid of all decor but mere sunlight on plaster walls."

All those years Miss Heinlein took her part in the national and international affairs of the theatre. She held office in the American National Theatre and Academy, the State and National Theatre Conferences, the American Educational Theatre Association, the American Society for Theatre Research. She was a delegate to Conferences of the U. S. Commission for UNESCO to the National Theatre Assemblies. Her paper for the International Congress of Theatre Scholars and Historians held in

Venice in '57 was published in German by the Institute for Theatre Science of the University of Vienna, and in other languages. She gave lectures on the drama, wrote articles and reviews, made reports for Foundations. She found time to write for children a play called The Panda and the Spy, first given at Vassar in 1943, and still showing in children's theatres. She visited theatres around the world. Now and then, by way of a holiday, yet keeping her hand in, she would spend a summer in one of the stock companies. In collaboration with Mrs. Stavrides, she had almost completed a translation of the memoirs of Andre Antoine, founder of the Theatre Libre in Paris.

But important as it was, her public role has for her friends and colleagues far less reality than her warm and generous personality, with its unique combination of wit and wisdom which responded so directly to the authentic, yet was so quick to unmask the false and deflate the pretentious. It has less reality than the gallant, playful and truly comic spirit that set our mundane concerns in a proper perspective.

On December 20, 1961, Mary Virginia Heinlein taught her last class. She died on Christmas Day.

Josephine Gleason
Clarice Pennock
William Rothwell
James Bruce Ross, Chairman

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