

JANE JENKINSON SWENARTON

1889 - 1965

Professor-emeritus Jane Jenkinson Swenarton, for twenty-eight years associated with Vassar's Department of English, died in Poughkeepsie on August 12, 1965.

Writers of memorial minutes tend to exaggerate the good qualities and achievements of the dead and to forgive or forget the imperfections, if such there be. Lead is transmuted into gold, and gold into the raiment of angels. Portraits emerge so distorted that like some modern paintings the subject is not recognizable except by those who have read the teacher's manual.

Jane Swenarton was not an angel. If the conceit may be forgiven, like the rest of us, she was part this and part that; in short, she was a human being.

Disliked heartily in some quarters, she disliked heartily in return.

She could be short, sometimes rude, but never unconsciously rude, and ready to take umbrage at the least offense, imagined or not. She was not a rebel but she did believe in standing on her own feet and being counted.

She never sought security in the protective coloration of those in authority. She had nothing but contempt for a "you-don't-know-on-which-side-your-bread-is-buttered" policy. She spurned those who were silent until tenure freed their minds and loosened their tongues.

She was a woman of convictions and looked down her nose at those whose two-fisted resolution of issues was "On the one hand --- Now, on the other hand."

Honest with herself and with others, jealous of her independence, and willing to express her honest, independent thought, she developed to high degree the fine art of making enemies.

If Jane Swenarton was difficult with many of her contemporaries, she was not so with her students. Here she was admired and respected as she herself respected them. Her strength lay, not only in her knowledge and in her capacity to communicate, but in

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a genuine and abiding interest in these young women; and many letters from old students who wrote to her at the time of her retirement testify to her influence and to the quality of her teaching as she led them to a critical appreciation of Shakespeare or James Joyce or Virginia Woolf.

At Skidmore College where Miss Swenarton taught before coming to Vassar, the Class of 1923 dedicated its year-book to her. In the course of a page-long appreciation it was said: "There is no one more closely in touch with student interests and activities than she, and to no one do we owe more gratitude . . . she has made English courses fascinating for even the least literary of us."

Unable to go on to the Ph.D. because of limited financial resources, Jane Swenarton finally received her doctor's degree in the form of an honorary Doctor of Humane Letters from Wilson College in 1956. Following her retirement here, she spent a year in Europe, and upon her return, accepted a position at Wilson as a John Hay Whitney Teaching Fellow. In awarding the honorary degree it was said: "To the disciplines of mind which have made her so perceptive a scholar and critic, she adds other qualities even more invaluable to the creative teacher—a refreshing sanity of outlook, an engaging humor, imagination tipped with fancy, and an enthusiasm which ranges with delight over a great many subjects—including her students."

The affection in which the students at Vassar held Jane Swenarton is suggested in a jingle (and this is one of many) composed in the manner of A. A. Milne by the students in a Shakespeare class:

Jane, Jane, Swenarton, Swenarton,

What will you do to we?

The tales that we've heard,

The wails that we've heard,

Make us afraid of an E.

Jane, Jane, Swenarton, Swenarton,

Have mercy on such as we,

We've studied the bard

So long and so hard

That we need some sympathy.

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Jane, Jane, Swenarton, Swenarton,

Treat us as if you were we,

For after Miss Bacon

We may be vacatin

For all eternity.

Jane, Jane, Swenarton, Swenarton,

That Shakespeare is great we agree,

But our love for him wanes

When we think that it gains

Us only a D or an E.

Jane, Jane, Swenarton, Swenarton,

We ask it on bended knee;

Take a little for granted and

Know that we've panted

Over this poetry.

Jane, Jane, Swenarton, Swenarton,

Lend a willing ear to our plea.

Only one tiny line

And a second of time

Will turn an E to a B.

(And oh ! the difference to we !)

Again, difficult as she could be at times, Miss Swenarton was not without close and devoted friends. Gathered from Smith College where she was graduated with a Phi Beta Kappa

key in 1911; from Erie, Pennsylvania, where she taught school for the first time; from Columbia where she received the Master's degree; from Skidmore and Vassar, she knew these friends, as they knew her, with confidence, intimacy, and loyalty. It was friendship in the best sense of that word and a relationship in which the foibles, strategems, and poses of superficial social life had no place. There were not many here who knew her intimately, but those who did valued her for her integrity, her knowledge, her understanding, and her forthrightness.

Jane Swenarton was widely read and had a fine knowledge of English literature and the English theater; she was familiar with the biographies or memoirs of many English and French women of unusual character or achievement; and she read German literature in German with ease and enjoyment. But she was not a productive scholar in the sense that she wrote books and contributed articles to the journals. She had once aspired to the creative life and she wrote many poems and short stories but none of these was ever published. She

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worked for years on the Journal of a great aunt who had made the grand tour of Europe early in the 19th century; no publisher was willing to take it. Earlier, she had written a play which was published by Samuel French; later she was to wish that it had never seen the light of day.

The classroom was her forte. Here she was at ease, here she was happy; here it was that she did her best work. Possessed of a clear and penetrating mind and a wealth of knowledge, versed in the techniques of scholarship, and skilled in the use of the Socratic method, she was able to make of her classes a true means to education. Aware that all education is self-education, it was her desire, not to instruct, but to lead her students to instruct themselves, and to know the worth of that instruction.

For many years before Jane Swenarton retired from Vassar College she suffered from arthritis. For years she lived a life of pain. For years she sought relief from physicians both at home and abroad, but to no avail. As her condition deteriorated, it was clear that for her the test of courage was not to die but to live. Bent and full of pain, she fought against overwhelming odds to live a normal life, attending lectures and concerts and the Experimental Theater's plays, visiting friends, absorbed in her books, keeping her mind sharp and shining.

Except for the passing of time itself, time heals most wounds; but for her, time brought only an increase of pain, debilitation, and despair. In the hospital for the last time, she gave up, her courage gone, and knowing that the end was imminent. The flame of determination was quenched and there

remained only helplessness, hopelessness, a loneliness which
nothing--no word, no act, no presence--could assuage.

Mercy came, bringing death.

Christine Havelock

Helen Wheeler

C. Gordon Post, Chairman

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