

## WINIFRED SMITH

1879 - 1967

Miss Winifred Smith, sometime Professor of English and Professor Emeritus of Drama and Chairman of the Division of Drama, died on October 28, 1967, in Louisville, Kentucky, at the age of eighty-eight. She had gone to Louisville some years after her retirement from the college in 1947 to be near her niece, Priscilla Smith Robertson.

Winifred Smith was born in Cincinnati, Ohio, in 1879, the daughter of Henry Preserved and Anna Macneale Smith. Her brother was Preserved Smith, who became a distinguished historian of the Reformation. She was graduated from Vassar in 1904 and came back as a member of the faculty, when she joined the English Department as an Instructor in 1911. She was made a Professor of English in 1926 and served briefly as chairman of that department, from 1929-1931. Of her work as a student at the college, she has written that "Miss Keyes's extraordinary course in Shakespeare was the beginning of my life long interest in the drama," and that it was at the encouragement of Miss Wylie that she went on to graduate work in English and comparative literature at Columbia University, where she was awarded the doctorate in 1912. In the years that she was working on her M.A. and Ph.D. degrees, she taught at Mt. Holyoke and at the Knox School in Lockwood, New Jersey, and studied for a year at the Sorbonne. During her tenure at the college she spent two sabbatical years in Rome, and taught as a Visiting Professor of English in summer sessions at Stanford and at the University of California. Among her major extra-curricular activities were her interest in the founding of Sarah Lawrence College and her membership on its board of trustees from 1932-1945 and her work for ten years on the board of the Poughkeepsie Community Theatre

Miss Smith took a leading part in the founding of the Division of Drama in 1936 with its attendant Experimental Theatre. She has described their evolution from Miss Buck's course in play-writing, in which students did some "walking through scenes," without costumes or scenery; then came the founding of two courses in dramatic production by the English Department, which Hallie Flannagan taught; then the establishment of the "now famous" Theatre in Avery in 1930, and finally the organization of the independent Division of Drama, headed by Miss Smith, with Hallie Flannagan as Professor of Drama and Director of the Theatre. It was during this period in the thirties that Hallie Flannagan experimented with the living newspaper as a dramatic form and gave the premier of T. S. Eliot's *Sweeney Agonistes*. Miss Smith

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served as Chairman of the Division during the tenure of Mrs. Flannagan and with Mary Virginia Heinlein, who succeeded her in 1942 as Professor of Drama and Director.

Miss Smith has been recognized as one of Vassar's great teachers; she was also one of its great rebels; and for her, taking a stand

began early and as a family tradition. Her father, Henry Preserved Smith, Biblical scholar, Presbyterian minister, Professor of Theology, a defender of the higher criticism, was tried for heresy by the Presbytery of Cincinnati, Ohio, and suspended from the ministry by the General Assembly in 1894 because he denied the verbal inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible. Her devotion to her father and admiration for him are remembered by her colleagues as one of the salient facts of her life. She has recorded, in an unpublished memoir, how, in her teens, she sat with her mother and her brother, Preserved, in the gallery, tingling with pride at her father's intrepid stand at his trial; and how as "the daughter of a heretic" she inspired a certain distrust in President Taylor, "a genial but conservative man" who advised her at the time of her appointment to Vassar that it is a "teacher's responsibility not to disturb the faith of the young." She adds that it was almost as disturbing a fact that she was "an ardent worker for woman's suffrage."

Miss Smith's advocacy of the suffrage movement (she was speaking all over the country for it in her first years at the college), her interest in the Poughkeepsie community (she taught courses for working women), her knowledge of contemporary politics and her sympathy with the revolutionary side, her concern for social justice, her constant efforts to keep her students alert to the connections between drama and the world were during her career active and interlocking attitudes. While such attitudes were not unusual among her contemporaries on the faculty, she lived them with a particular energy, became known, she writes, as a "radical" by some of the trustees and parents. They may have found their opinion substantiated if they saw an article written by Vice-President Coolidge in a national magazine on red tendencies in America's colleges when he quoted as an example, the Vassar Miscellany News as saying, "Miss Smith was quite favorably impressed by the Soviet Ambassador and struck by his moderation and intelligence as compared to the narrowness of some of the Senate committee." That was in 1921.

But Winifred Smith's concern with the contemporary world was never detached from the great tradition of the theater itself, from the Greek, European, English and American drama. She was a very WINIFRED SMITH - continued.

learned woman. She was the author of two books, *The Comedia del Arte* and *Italian Actors in the Renaissance*; she wrote articles and reviews on innumerable subjects connected with the drama; she translated for production plays by French and Italian writers, and she travelled widely in Europe studying the theater. She spoke French, German and Italian and read Spanish. She planned and taught with Professors Grace Macurdy and Philip Davis of the Classics Department a course called "Tragedy; Greek, Renaissance and Modern." This course became Drama 220, a course in comparative drama, one of the most demanding and distinguished courses in the college. It was conducted by Miss Smith in collaboration

with members of the English, Classics and Modern Language Departments. It is remembered that Miss Smith had "a swift acting genius for correlation"; and her card file of the synopses of plays that she had read was the wonder of her department; it seems that it contained enough plays to stagger a computer. Of the many reviews she wrote for the outside world, it is said that "she dashed them off at a high speed but always getting to the core of the matter." Her reviews of current productions on the Vassar campus (she herself was not a director) also got to the core of the matter. They were careful to educate the college community in the tradition of the drama and in the study of drama at Vassar. For example, in the year of her retirement Miss Smith wrote of one production that it was "studied in a fundamental way." "Our theater," she continued, "is one of the few on university campuses that takes its function seriously. For years it has presented significant plays that show its audiences what the stage at its best can do to illuminate tradition, interpret yesterday's and today's philosophies, and through picture and the spoken word, hold the mirror up to nature."

Professor Emeritus Helen Sandison, a long time friend and colleague of Miss Smith's in the English Department (and in its relations with the Division of Drama) wrote among other things, when I asked for reminiscences of their teaching here: "Like her father, Winifred was a swift and brilliant thinker. She always, it seemed to me, thought through her feelings. This led, sometimes, to misjudgment or inaccuracy, but also to her compelling influence on her students." One of these (a confirmed Tory, her favorite Shakespeare play was *Coriolanus*), whom she "awoke," temporarily at least, to George Bernard Shaw, gave money to the college library in honor of "that brilliant but misguided woman." And when Miss Smith died, she wrote, "My years at Vassar are still real and living and splendid thanks to Miss Smith." One other anecdote rounds out the picture of Miss Smith's influence in the college and in the world: "a young scholar who