

MINDFUL SPIRIT IN LATE MEDIEVAL LITERATURE

ESSAYS IN HONOR OF ELIZABETH D. KIRK

Edited by
Bonnie Wheele 工苏工业学院图书馆 藏 书 章





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Mindful Spirit in Late Medieval Literature: Essays in Honor of Elizabeth D. Kirk edited by Bonnie Wheeler



Elizabeth D. Kirk (photo courtesy of Liam Purdon)

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MINDFUL SPIRIT

Bonnie Wheeler

This collection of seventeen essays on later medieval (especially English) literature is gathered to honor Elizabeth D. Kirk, Israel J. Kapstein Professor of English and Professor of Comparative Literature Emerita at Brown University. The individual contents of this diverse book are encapsulated by each author in abstracts appearing beneath each title. What the essays share in addition to the authors' admiration for Elizabeth Kirk is attentiveness to the mindful spirit of medieval literature. To give readers who do not have the pleasure of Elizabeth's acquaintance a richer sense of her mind and spirit, I have interspersed with the following biographical information a few reflections (signaled by italics) selected by Beth Keiser in various voices of friends and former students.

Elizabeth Kirk was born into a Midwestern academic family with strong Quaker roots. After being graduated from The Westtown School in Pennsylvania in 1955, she took her B.A. (Honors, English) at Earlham College, one of the most distinguished of America's fine liberal arts colleges. There she studied with such scholars as Wayne Booth. Her long Quaker education deepened her naturally mindful disposition, encouraging her to be simultaneously aware of the joys of solitary thought and the pleasures of community.

She has always been aware of the pressure of the unspoken as well as the power of the spoken.

On the cusp of the 1960s, she returned from Indiana to the East Coast when she entered Yale as one of the members of the first wave of women graduate students in English admitted to that notable department by then graduate director E. Talbot Donaldson. She completed her doctorate swiftly, studying primarily with Donaldson but in a department also including Old

English scholar John Pope and Marie Borroff (whose revisionist essay on the poem "St. Erkenwald" appears in this volume). At Yale, her college friendship with two fellow English-majors from Earlham deepened into what was to become a lifelong collaboration with Elizabeth Keiser in Medieval Studies and R. Melvin Keiser in Religious Studies.

Her dissertation, "The Method of Piers Plowman," broke new ground in the study of that poem, leading a new generation to probe Langland's intellectual and spiritual momentum. After completing her Ph.D. in 1964, she was appointed an Instructor in English at Yale from 1964 to 1967. On the face of it, her career trajectory from that point resembles that of the most privileged male academics of her generation: In 1967, she moved from apprenticeship at Yale to a tenure-track position at another Ivy League school, Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island, where she rose steadily through the ranks to a full professorship both in English and in Comparative Literature by 1980. She then graced distinguished chairs—first the Nicholas Brown Professorship of Oratory and Belles Lettres (1989) and then the Israel J. Kapstein Professorship of English in 1995. But this exterior account of her professorial profile belies the distinctiveness with which she exercised her métier.

Her first book on Langland was published by Yale University Press (1972). The Dream Thought of Piers Plowman remains a touchstone of interpretive clarity. Kirk is aware of the pleasures of Langland's "difficulty" both as a poetic topos and as a reader's experience. Her many subsequent articles continue to show both her careful respect for the integrity of her texts and their aesthetic, historic, religious, and philosophic dimensions. Her book-in-progress on literature, philosophy, and spirituality in the late fourteenth century insists upon the subtle variety with which writers respected imaginative ways of knowing.

Elizabeth Kirk arrived at Brown in time to participate in the transformation of a sleepy college into an energetic major university. Brown made its mark through the implementation of a radical "New Curriculum." That curriculum rested on a grand premise and promise: that each student's work would be individualized in order to be academically relevant to that student's whole development. The success of this experiment largely depended on faculty advisors willing to dwell thoughtfully on each student—faculty who recognize and respect various modes of thought and ways of knowing. It was an all-consuming demand, one in which Professor Kirk enmeshed herself and at which she excelled.

I have long been an admirer of Professor Kirk, ever since I had the good fortune to take her "Medieval Drama" course at Brown University in 1992,

my senior year. It was her course that first made me aware of the immense and meticulous scholarship that supports good teaching. Professor Kirk also taught me much about pedagogy as well as scholarship, although it took me years to learn the lesson. What I appreciate now, but found exasperating at the time, was her tolerance for different modes of learning. While some of us, in pseudo-scholarly imitation, spent our time trolling through the critical apparatuses of EETS editions, other students were reenacting conversations between Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe or staging elaborate modernized productions of the plays. I remember that one final production of a Mary and Joseph play starred a young woman who was actually eight months pregnant. Professor Kirk, in her quiet way, registered delight, not only in the pleasure of the performance but also in the critical engagement of the performers. I know she has inspired many of us who chose careers in academia, but clearly she has also helped many others develop their own approaches to learning.

For many years Elizabeth Kirk served as English undergraduate honors advisor. She was unflagging in her commitment to undergraduate teaching. From her earliest years, however, she was equally dedicated to the training of graduate students. She was among the excellent faculty (including such other remarkable women scholars as Barbara K. Lewalski and Rosalie Colie) who brought high distinction to literary studies at Brown. As I know personally, since I was her earliest doctoral advisee, she was a model supervisor, always firm in thought but considerate in manner. Each of her students felt her benign impress.

I first met Elizabeth Kirk in 1975 when I was in my mid-twenties and a graduate student in Brown University's Ph.D. program in English literature. A college professor myself, I had a very high standard for teaching excellence, and few people ever really got an "A" from me as my teacher. But Elizabeth was one of those rare individuals. Clear, careful and precise in her scholarship, and respectful of all, Elizabeth's classes were a welcome oasis from the sometime abrasive atmosphere that permeated the department when I first encountered it.

Over the nearly four years I spent at Brown with Elizabeth, however, she became more than an outstanding professor for me; she became a mentor, a colleague, and a friend. Curiously, that all happened because I was frustrated at the lack of any written handbook for Ph.D. students as we worked our way through the labyrinthine process of graduate studies at Brown. As a member of the Graduate Student Council, I voiced that frustration one day during my first year, and Elizabeth, ever calm and wise, suggested that we collaborate on developing such a handbook. With another graduate student, we produced over the course of the next year a document that, through many iterations, has served Brown English graduate students well for several generations. But the success of the project was not the only gift I received from that year's work; it also let me encounter Elizabeth as one of the most compassionate, respectful, and truly gentle souls I have ever known.

No one was beneath her concern; as Director of Graduate Studies, Elizabeth exhibited a determination to assist each student as though she or he were the only one. That quiet resolution on her part changed the atmosphere of the department, creating a milieu for students over the next years so improved that it was hard to believe. And Elizabeth was the reason.

That sense of fairness and quiet wisdom are hallmarks I have seen grow over the more than three decades since we met. Later in life, I had the privilege to participate in the Coolidge Colloquium with her, a 30-day program which brought thirty Catholics, Protestants, and Jews together to study and pray as scholars who attempted to show that it was possible to interact at deep intellectual and spiritual levels in an atmosphere of respect and understanding. Several years later, we co-directed that Colloquium for two years, and there I saw in her the fruit of a life lived reflectively. I recall vividly the way she began each year, reminding the scholars at our first session together when all were still strangers to each other: "Nothing in scholarship is unacceptable except that which is sloppy or unkind." And that is so telling of Elizabeth: a woman who lives life with deep reflection and great kindness. My own life is richer because of the gift of her friendship.

Over the years she served as visiting professor at two Quaker institutions, Guilford College (where she collaborated with Mel and Beth Keiser in interdisciplinary pedagogy) and her alma mater, Earlham College. She was awarded notable fellowships and delivered distinguished lectureships. As a teacher, her seminars were models of pedagogic restraint in which students were always full participants; her lectures were as elegantly expressed as they were authoritatively considered.

Through Guilford College's Faculty Development series, Elizabeth Kirk was invited to give an address that would exhibit excellent teaching in an interdisciplinary mode. I urged a young historian to attend what I knew would be an exemplary lecture on the development of the plow as a context for William Langland's vision of religious and economic crisis. This colleague prided himself on already being an excellent lecturer (which in fact he was) and an interdisciplinary thinker (which he was becoming, eventually distinguishing himself in the field of medical history at Duke). Later he remarked, "As Professor Kirk began to lecture, I thought to myself: Why this is a good lecture. As she continued, it occurred to me: This is a very good lecture indeed. But towards the end it dawned on me: No, this is in fact the best lecture I have ever heard."

In the early part of Elizabeth Kirk's career there were few women in any academic post; even in the later stages of her career there were still relatively few women in senior positions. Her views on women in the academy were

affected not only by her Quaker roots and her powerful and academically accomplished mother, but also by her Yale experience.

Before becoming Department Chairman at Brown, Elizabeth was Director of Graduate Studies in English. From extensive discussions with her about this and with some of the graduate students who benefited, I know that she applied herself with energy and care providing support for that low, almost invisible (at least to the rest of the world) form of human existence, "the graduate student." While blithely foregrounding the anecdote about her mentor, E. Talbot Donaldson—who, when confronted by an inquirer how it was that during his tenure as Director of Graduate Studies in English that the number of women students increased from a small minority to fifty percent, answered without any of his typically layered irony that he made that happen "Because it was right!"—she was engaging modestly in the background with a comparable achievement of the care and feeding (often literally) of English graduate students, a commitment which has endeared her to many who earned doctorates at Brown University.

Among her myriad committee assignments was her participation in the historic settlement of one of the most famous affirmative action cases successfully brought against an institution of higher education in America: Louise Lamphere vs. Brown University, which required years of careful legal and campus mediation. Brown is a university that came to take its obligations to equality seriously, in good measure because the community could depend, ironically, upon such women faculty as Elizabeth Kirk to spend an inordinate amount of time and effort upholding the law and the university's highest ideals. She was among those who led and shaped Brown's innovative program in medicine, a program that aimed to humanize medical education and shorten the time required to achieve the M.D. She was a totally dedicated university citizen but—rara avis—she entirely lacked the desire for position. Positions were thus thrust upon her precisely because she was a consummate listener whose sole agenda was a desire to help her colleagues achieve real consensus. This, in the academic culture wars of her generation and at a university as competitive as Brown, was not merely daunting. It was enervating and impossible. It took a huge personal toll made only a little lighter by her vital dedication to teaching and to scholarly life. It was aided most memorably by her great beasts from poodles to Dobermans.

I can see so clearly the very first time I met Elizabeth. In the fall of 1978, I was a timid first-year graduate student with an M.A. from the University of Kansas, eager to meet the warm and kind graduate advisor who in several phone calls had helped persuade me to come to Brown. Climbing to the top of the stairs in Horace Mann,

I found her office door—and froze. Lying on the threshold was a giant Doberman. Elizabeth cheerfully waved me in, as though nothing at all was amiss. I thought perhaps it was some kind of test. Gingerly, I stepped over the dog and, in her tiny, chaotic office, Elizabeth proceeded to give me a thorough orientation. Nothing was said about the Doberman.

Later I came to know Freya well. She was in fact extraordinarily gentle. Occasionally Elizabeth asked me to babysit her, and each time the same thing happened. After we said goodbye to Elizabeth, the dog and I would start the walk home to my apartment. Thoroughly well trained, Freya would heel obediently, off-leash—until we reached the first street corner. Then, with a look of panic in her eyes, she bolted, racing away. She always returned to the place she saw Elizabeth last, where I would find her, shivering and sad. Their reunion a few days later was always a little scene of pure joy.

Enough cannot be said about the warmth and generosity Elizabeth extended to those students under her care as graduate advisor of the English Department. But Elizabeth also taught me many life lessons. Her caring was more than an exercise of professional responsibility; it was the guiding principle of her life. It was given without judgment to creatures in general, including her beloved "quadrupeds," and especially embracing the ones whose timidity lay beneath a concealing exterior.

Elizabeth's reticence is matched by her quiet wit—pithy remarks accompanied a chuckle and entirely without rancor.

After dragging Elizabeth to a tedious, four-hour long Japanese movie, I said rather defensively afterwards in the lobby, "Well the reviews all described it as epic!" to which Elizabeth replied, "I always knew there was something wrong with that genre."

In between directing NEH Seminars for College Teachers and codirecting (with former graduate student and longtime friend Sr. Joan Lescinski) the Coolidge Seminars for the Association for Religion in Intellectual Life, she enjoyed her New England summers with her extended family and occasionally included her graduate students in her holidays to a family hideaway island in New Hampshire.

Despite my general lack of enthusiasm for nature, some of my happiest memories of Elizabeth concern her family's tiny island in a New Hampshire lake and the living arrangements on it: an unfinished house with only rudimentary plumbing, supplemented by tents that were Spartan to varying degrees. One especially memorable feature of summers there was the Ecolet, an environmentally friendly toilet-substitute that visiting friends had to be encouraged to use. There was no flushing involved, only the decorous covering of one's waste with handfuls of grass. When I came out onto the porch

shortly after arriving for my first visit, the entire group of friends and family gathered there burst into laughter. Elizabeth, chortling, explained that it was because they had just been discussing the peculiar look to be seen only on the faces of guests who had been using the Ecolet for the first time—"and that," she concluded, gesturing toward my face, "is the look."

After spending my first night in an unfinished upstairs room that I shared with a bat—who pursued me downstairs when I attempted to escape—I opted for one of the tents for the second night. Elizabeth showed me in, and, as far as I could tell in the dark, unzipped one of the tent's walls. "What are you doing?" I asked. "You'll see," she replied. In the morning, it was freezing—and the first thing I saw when I opened my eyes, beyond the tent flap she had opened, was the sun rising over the glistening lake, one of the most breathtaking sights of my life. I don't know to how many other students and friends Elizabeth offered that gift of sun and water, but I'll always be grateful I was one of them.

Elizabeth Kirk has always practiced the domestic arts as part of her commitment to a holistic world and an interwoven life. One anecdote expresses this attitude best. Before codirecting the Coolidge Seminars, she was a Coolidge Fellow at Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts. One evening, she came to a poetry reading by Denise Levertov.

The focus of the evening was a series of poems just completed on Julian of Norwich. Levertov was blissfully unaware that the audience included a medievalist from Brown who had long taught Julian in various contexts and had written about her in the culminating chapters of a book in process on fourteenth-century spirituality. Elizabeth has always been a serious tailor, often constructing her wardrobe over summer vacations. It was June going into July and she was at work sewing on some piece of fabric, sitting on the edge of the circle as Levertov read her poems. One could discern in the poet's face a condescending politeness to such domestic labor occurring on the periphery. When the poetry reading concluded and the discussion began, Elizabeth looked up from her sewing and began gently to raise some questions and then to make insightful comments in response to Levertov's comments and questions back to her—all the while continuing her sewing. One could see the look in the poet's face change from polite allowance for idiosyncrasy to grateful acceptance of having come upon a treasure trove.

Along with Mary Carruthers, Elizabeth edited a collection of essays honoring their mentor Talbot Donaldson, and, along with Judith Anderson, she finished revising and annotating Donaldson's translation of *Piers Plowman* for student use.

When I stayed with Elizabeth for a few days to review the copyediting of the Piers Plowman translation, her Doberman Lucy was seemingly full-grown but technically

(and personally) still a puppy. After a long day of reviewing the copyedit, we proceeded to gaudeamus, and I, ever jean-clad in honor of Lucy's status, became exuberant in tugging at a rope toy with her dogship. Elizabeth surveyed this scene with various chuckles and other appreciative gestures, until suddenly she said rather firmly, followed by another melodious chuckle, "You must remember that she has teeth." I desisted.

For some reason, this small scene became an image for me of Elizabeth's sensitivity to reality, as well as of her enjoyment of exuberance. Perhaps only Elizabeth herself could truly appreciate my understated memory, which included her everamazing tact.

Upon her retirement from Brown, Professor Kirk moved from urban Providence to the rural Black Mountain, near Asheville, North Carolina. It is a place that recalls the local Utopian experiment of Black Mountain College. Here she has amplified her extended-family network of creatures large and small. Just as she had imbedded herself in New England life, lovingly restoring country farmhouses and city townhouses, she has devoted herself to the rehabilitation of two derelict houses and the oversight of their idyllic eight-acre setting amidst two ponds with striking views of the Craggy Mountains. Elizabeth Kirk has now uncovered another talent and discipline: pottery. None of her friends are as surprised as she is by her talent at this art, now a thriving enterprise she calls 'When Pigs Fly.'