

## BOOK REVIEW

*The Drunken Duchess of Vassar: Grace Harriet Macurdy, Pioneering Feminist Classical Scholar.* By BARBARA MCMANUS. Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2017. Pp. xxii + 281. Hardcover, \$99.95. ISBN 978-0-8142-1327-8.

Grace Harriet Macurdy probably was never drunk in her life (she was a teetotaler) and far from a duchess (born in rural Maine in 1866 and growing up in working class family in Watertown, Massachusetts), but Barbara McManus's title for her biography of this pioneering feminist Greek scholar and teacher captures Macurdy's whimsy and spirit. A long-time professor at Vassar, Macurdy had a penchant for dresses of exquisite fabrics, jewelry and elaborate hats, as well as a slightly disheveled and absent-minded demeanor (4). The young women she taught affectionately called her "the Drunken Duchess" or "the Mad Queen," which perhaps more than anything shows the splash that Macurdy made for years on Vassar's campus.

Yet, McManus's biography is not some sort of biographical *Goodbye, Mr. Chips*. Macurdy's life deserves to be told for two reasons. First, her career offers an example of the challenges faced by classicists generally as colleges and universities transitioned from a classics-heavy curriculum in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to one of increasing options in the 20<sup>th</sup>. Macurdy's engagement with the pressures of declining enrollments, changes in college graduation requirements, competition between departments for bodies, and the struggle to maintain healthy Ancient Greek enrollments is likely to sound familiar to all. Second, and more importantly, Macurdy wrangled with challenges that many of our students encounter today—and her grace, generosity and stamina are humbling and inspiring. Her story is one of a 1<sup>st</sup> generation college-goer who delays her own career advancement to support the education of her younger siblings, who commuted to Columbia from Poughkeepsie to complete her PhD while teaching a full course load, who struggled with a physical disability (profound hearing loss), and who, despite choosing not to marry (so that she might continue to work), ended up mothering and raising a niece and two nephews.

And she published! Her early work on Greek tragedy built on her dissertation research, but throughout her career she eagerly pursued new fields of study, publishing on early Greek culture and religion (inspired by the work of her friend Jane

Ellen Harrison), and two groundbreaking books on Hellenistic queens and vassal queens. McManus's analysis of these latter two books illuminates how much feminist classical scholars of today owe Macurdy, because she was not just (ha!) a female classical scholar, but she chose in her mature years to focus her attention on the women of the classical world, arguing for their place as worthy topics of investigation in their own right. McManus carefully delineates how Macurdy took pains not to render the queens she researched as caricatures or subordinate figures, but looked at them as powerful agents who had to work within the social constraints of their times. To do justice to them she looked at information that others did not (e.g., coins, inscriptions), probing any course that might yield a fuller picture. McManus touts this work as revolutionary, and indeed it may have been an initial step toward the study of ancient women as a legitimate field of scholarship. In addition Macurdy left us 70-odd other publications on a variety of subjects, a book on mercy in Greek literature written in the early days of World War II, and her painstaking research into her own family's genealogy. McManus details with precision and affection the details of all Macurdy's many accomplishments, creating for her readers a vivid portrait of the life journey of this woman, who faced remarkable challenges from the beginning, who had to fight against societal pressures to marry, discrimination and at times callous and vindictive treatment at the hands of her male colleagues, and yet who never appeared daunted by them for long.

McManus is an obvious booster for Macurdy, and at times this means that we do not get, perhaps, the most clear-eyed view of the two great controversies in Macurdy's life: her on-going conflict with her department chair, Abby Leach, and a later feud with Princeton professor Edward Capps over his treatment of her friend and director of the American School of Classical Studies in Athens, Bert Hodge Hill.<sup>1</sup> McManus observes rightly that many have presented the side of Macurdy's opponents in these conflicts, and she here offers a counterbalance to those narratives. I rather suspect that McManus's reading of these two conflicts—where she presents Macurdy on the side of the angels—is probably not far off the

<sup>1</sup> Indeed, McManus devotes perhaps an excessive amount of time to the lives and relationships of Elizabeth Pierce, Ida Thallon, Bert Hodge Hill and Carl Blegen in a biography about none of them (especially chapters 8 and 9). Nevertheless, the stories she divulges are extraordinary, and suggests that the "Quartet" certainly merit a biography of their own.

mark. Yet, at times she appears a little too much an admirer and less the dispassionate biographer to the detriment of the bigger picture.<sup>2</sup> Yet, if that is the worst of her sins ... well, it is not much of a distraction from a well-conceived and compelling tale of this diminutive giant.

McManus died having just put the finishing touches to the manuscript, and so one mourns the fact that she has no opportunity to enjoy the accolades she certainly merits from devoting her careful and analytical mind to Macurdy's life. Yet, we can all rejoice that she continued with this project till the end, for there is a great deal that we can all learn from the life and work of this formidable foremother.

ELIZABETH A. MANWELL

*Kalamazoo College*, elizabeth.manwell@kzoo.edu

<sup>2</sup>For example, her hostility to M.I. Finley's review of Macurdy's book on vassal queens misses an opportunity to engage in serious treatment of racialized terminology and what today we might call microaggressions in her zeal to exculpate Macurdy (206–208).