

Memorial Minute for Dean Tolle Mace

December 8, 1999

Dean Tolle Mace, professor emeritus of English, who joined this faculty in 1952 and retired in 1987, died at his home in Poughkeepsie on September 16, 1999.

He was born on May 21, 1922, in Neosho, Missouri. In 1940, he entered Washington University, in St. Louis, and received his B.A. in 1948, his college career having been interrupted by service in the United States Army in World War II. He received his advanced degrees, an M.A. in 1949, and a Ph.D. in 1952, from Columbia University.

Before coming to Vassar he had been a member of the faculty of Washington University for two years. At Vassar he began as an instructor in English and was one of the earliest House Fellows. He rose through the ranks to full professor, was appointed to the Henry Noble MacCracken Chair in English, and served for eight years, beginning in 1969, as chairman of his department. In 1967 he was a visiting professor at the University of York in England, and in 1981 at Bedford College of the University of London.

The title of Dean Mace's doctoral dissertation, "English Musical Thought in the Eighteenth Century: A Study of an Art in Decline," signaled that here was a future professor of English with a difference. Of the articles and reviews that he wrote for various publications ranging from the *Musical Quarterly* to the *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, most were concerned with the relationships between the art of literature and the arts of music and painting, and he contributed to five books devoted to that subject.

Such titles as "Pietro Bembo and the Literary Origins of the Italian Madrigal" or "*Ut pictura poesis*: Dryden, Poussin and the Parallel of Poetry and Painting in the Seventeenth Century" may suggest the range of his work. The last of his writings in this complex field appeared just two years ago in Volume IV of the *Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*. Comparison of the arts is an endeavor of long standing -- but Dean Mace looked at old ideas from new and unconventional angles. One of his strengths was his keen perception of the details of individual works of art, and he was unusual in his ability to show that meaning in a literary work could be compared to the visual qualities in a painting.

But Dean's learning manifested itself far beyond the boundaries of his formal academic writings. It is not an exaggeration to say that not only Dean's classroom teaching but almost all aspects of his life -- his avocations and recreations, his conversations, his dealings with the everyday world-- were imbued with the rich colors of that learning. Indeed, in the last month of his life, severely disabled and hardly able to speak, he could make a conversational point with a quotation from Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

Of all the arts, it was music for which he had a special love. He enjoyed performing on the piano and the harpsichord, and he spent hours listening to music. In his years in St. Louis, he had developed both an understanding and a great affection for the works of Ravel and Debussy and had learned to play those works. In his later years, he took a special interest in the operas of Mozart, Strauss, and Wagner. Opera, indeed, had always been one of his passions. An old friend of his recalls that one of the pleasures of going to the

Metropolitan Opera with Dean and his wife, Mary Ann, was listening to their lively and informed critical comments on the way home in the car. For most of his life, Dean was also a knowledgeable collector of paintings.

The courses, at all levels, that he taught at Vassar were for the most part within the area of his principal interests: Shakespeare, Tudor and Stuart literature, and eighteenth century English literature. Like all teachers of the literature of earlier ages, he had to deal with the fact that many undergraduates prefer to study the culture of the present rather than that of the past. He met that challenge with remarkable success and indeed earned a reputation for breathing new life into difficult pre-modern literature. One of his former students, recalling her days in his classroom, says that "he never forgot a book, consulted a note, or re-stated a phrase" and "treated his students like learned, cultured peers, who were fully capable of assimilating, without strain, the prodigious reading he assigned each week."

When Dean Mace first came to Vassar, one of the prevailing pedagogical pieties was that the faculty must "meet the students where they are." It is clear that Dean Mace, however, inspired his students to want to meet him where he was. And where he was, of course, was in the rich landscape of the traditional high culture of Western Europe, through which he moved with ease and pleasure.

But such a metaphor, while useful up to a point, fails to suggest his full dimensions. He had, after all, grown up in the Missouri of the 1920's and 1930's, a long way from Europe, and he demonstrated qualities that might have made him a success outside

the academic sphere -- as a lawyer or a physician, perhaps, or as a businessman -- or, as a friend who admired Dean's precision and dexterity, once observed -- as a master watchmaker. He possessed a cool and fine-edged competence, and his views of the world of the here and now were realistic and tough-minded. In the words, again, of a former student, Dean Mace "had no illusions about human nature but was tolerant of those who did."

His usual manner was one of quiet civility, and in general he had little interest in causes or crusades, but when he did decide to march into battle, he wielded his wit and learning with powerful effect. A memorable example was his successful public attack in 1969 upon a plan by the Vassar College administration to place a building on the hillside overlooking Sunset Lake. Taking what was for him the unusual step of writing a letter to the *Miscellany News*, he denounced the perpetrators of the building plan as both "wicked" and "foolish," declared that the plan demonstrated "no more sensibility than one would expect from a Bedlam lunatic," and opined that Alexander Pope "would have put all the schemers behind this plan in the Dunciad where they belong." This side of Dean's temperament recently emerged again when he took a prominent role in a battle waged by local music-lovers to retain the Poughkeepsie area's capacity to receive broadcasts of classic music from radio station WQXR, whose signal from New York had been blocked by a station devoted to music of a decidedly non-classical kind.

Dean's qualities of temperament and character were put to good service in the years when he played leadership roles in the College as chairman of the English department and as a member of

the Faculty Advisory Committee. Those were the years of the anti-Vietnam war and civil rights movements, and of the growth of the so-called "counter-culture," and Vassar was not only swept by the ideological gales blowing across every American campus but also undergoing profound changes of its own, chief among them the coming of co-education.

One of the things that helped to make Dean Mace an effective steadying force in that era of unrest and upheaval was his faith in the collective wisdom of the Vassar faculty. That kind of faculty, he wrote in 1969, "is a special strength in this age when discontinuity and fragmentation in one form or another appear to be threatening not only the life of institutions but the life of civilization itself."

"Civilization" was a key idea in Dean's intellectual and spiritual universe, and so one is not surprised to find that the title of his 1983 Convocation address was " 'Civilities' and 'Civilizations'." It is a complex discourse, full of learning, but a short passage near the end will give some sense of the whole, perhaps, and moreover serve as a fitting end to this memorial minute:

The proper metaphor for civilization is "harmony," not unity. For harmony is made of the diverse, never of things alike. In the future we must more and more see ourselves as part of a large, even global civilization, in which the extremest contraries meet. Our own Western civilization has taught us to entertain a view of existence which can at once envisage human activity as comic and tragic. There is strength in this self-contradicting vision. It means that when we try we can always see "the other"; and that we can accept things and fundamental views which differ. Failure at any time does not have to lead us to despair. We can always transform ourselves.

Respectfully submitted,

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Christine M. Havelock, Professor Emeritus of Art

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