IN MEMORIAM

JOY HAMBUECHEN POTTER

After a six-month struggle with a progressive neurological disorder, Joy Hambuechen Potter died on July 30, 1991. She was only fifty-six years old, and with two important books to her credit, as well as several grants, and a decade-long tenure at the rank of full professor, Joy was at the peak of her career and should have experienced many more years of professional productivity and public recognition for it. Since her last scholarly work was on Dante, it is perhaps fitting that we apply the poet’s own technique of “retrospective illumination”—the idea that only from the vantage point of the end can we look back on a life (or a work of fiction) and understand its full significance—to Joy’s own biography. In both a political and scholarly sense, her final contributions do serve retroactively to order and justify a remarkable professional itinerary. In fact, her final article, “Beatrice, Dead or Alive: Love in the Vita Nuova” argues vehemently against the masculinization of western literary culture and as such, can be read as an allegory of the difficulty that women face in academia, especially in so conservative a field as Italian studies.

Joy was born in Zurich on March 4, 1935, and raised in Lloyd’s Neck, Long Island. She obtained her secondary education in Florence, at Miss Barry’s Foreign School, then went on to Radcliffe College for the A.B. in 1956 (summa cum laude) and a Certificate in Business Administration in 1957. For the remainder of her graduate work, she pursued the special interest of her undergraduate years: Italian literature. She was a Fulbright Scholar in Milan in 1962-63, did a year of graduate work in Italian at Berkeley, then completed that training at Rutgers, where she was awarded the M.A. in 1964 and Ph.D. in 1967 under the direction of Glauco Cambon. During doctoral work, Joy served as Instructor at Rutgers. Upon receiving the Ph.D. she was Assistant Professor for four years at the
University of Pennsylvania. In 1971 she came to Texas as Associate Professor and was made Professor in 1981. In 1984 she was awarded an N.E.H. Summer Fellowship for seminar study at Dumbarton Oaks.

Joy's teaching reflected her abiding intellectual curiosity and catholicity of interests. Aside from those courses which she taught on a regular basis—Italian language, literature, and civilization—she taught a wide array of interdisciplinary topics. One of the most challenging courses she regularly taught—and for which she was most admired by students, receiving the highest accolades in teaching surveys—was on Dante's Commedia and Goethe's Faust. Joy was known as a highly skilled and demanding teacher who never failed to introduce new elements of critical inquiry and new perspectives into her teaching. Partly for those reasons, she was very active in two of the campus' finest interdisciplinary programs, Plan II and Comparative Literature. Her national service as a member of the Advisory Screening Committee in Romance Languages and Literatures of the Council for International Exchange of Scholars (Fulbright), as a panelist to evaluate grant proposals for the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Jacob Javits Fellowship, her membership on the editorial board of Italica, her chairing of the National Medieval and Renaissance Italian Literature Division of the Modern Languages Association, attest to the breadth of her intellectual interests and her practical academic experience, as well as the recognition she received from her peers.

Joy's embrace of feminism toward the end of her career reflected as much an intellectual openness to new critical approaches as a personal reaction to her own professional struggles. It was this very openness which led her constantly to experiment and to vary the focus of her scholarly activity. From the perspective of the ending, looking back over the journey that culminated in a feminist's Beatrice, we can only be struck by the bold and felicitous turns that Joy's itinerary would take. As an undergraduate, she wrote an honors thesis on the great nineteenth-century author of "verismo," Giovanni Verga. For her doctoral dissertation, instead, she chose a paradigmatic twentieth-century figure, the great neorealist writer Elio Vittorini. She published a group of articles on Vittorini in the most influential journals in the field, and a book for the Twayne series (1979), but eventually left him behind, along with the stylistic/thematic methodology which typified her approach at that time, to move into an entirely different subfield within Italian and a new set of critical strategies. It took great courage to make such a leap (six centuries back in terms of primary texts, light years ahead in terms of theory). Her new scholarship concerned Boccaccio's
Decameron, a canonical text requiring an entire schooling in the medieval culture it so momentously embodies, and her new theoretical approach involved the anthropological and structural principles of frame theory. Her "Boccaccio as Illusionist: The Play of Frames in the Decameron" served as a pilot study for a book-length treatment of the cornice or frame-story of Boccaccio's one-hundred tales. The ingenious project won prestigious N.E.H. support (1977-78) and was published by Princeton University Press (1982). The book demonstrated the remarkable results of Joy's self-education in critical theory during those "post-Vittorini" years. In Five Frames for the Decameron she brought symbolic anthropology, sociology, semiotics and philology to bear on the text in a bold attempt to prove its interpretive pluralism.

Joy's interest in the Middle Ages led her, naturally, to the summa of Italian medieval literary production in Dante's Commedia. Again she embarked on a prodigious program of self-education, during which time she became fascinated with the figure of Beatrice and her implications for a feminist rethinking of the texts in which she figures (both the Commedia and the earlier, lyric-prose hybrid book of transcendent love, La vita nuova). It is easy to speculate about the third book that Joy would have written, crowning her career and retrospectively expressing her own personal struggles as a career woman on a difficult journey. That book would have surely centered on Beatrice and would have made a substantial contribution both to medieval scholarship and to the cause of gender studies in the Academy.

Joy's feminism, however, did not preclude intellectual friendships with several men who contributed significantly to her scholarly development. There was Arnolfo Ferruolo at Harvard, Donald Sellstrom at U.T., and most momentously, Glauco Cambon at Rutgers. To this last, Joy was bound by the strongest bonds of admiration and loyalty and upon his sudden death in 1988, she wrote several deeply moving testimonials in which her own generosity and humanity were given their fullest expression.

Joy is survived by her daughter, Karen Moser, a resident of Austin; her two sisters, Diana Sharp and Beata Alden, and a brother, James Hambuechen, all three of Seattle; her half-brother, Amerigo Franchetti, resides in Florence. To the university community she leaves a legacy of impassioned commitment to Italian literature, to
feminist theory, and to the general advancement of humanistic study. She will be missed and remembered fondly by the many friends, colleagues and students whose lives she touched during her twenty years at The University of Texas.

Robert M. Berdahl, President
The University of Texas at Austin

H. Paul Kelley, Secretary
The General Faculty

This Memorial Resolution was prepared by a special committee consisting of Professors Millicent Marcus (Chair), Jean-Pierre Cauvin, and Lee Fontanella.