Panel Proposal: Celebrating and Contextualizing Barbara McManus’ *The Drunken Duchess of Vassar: Grace Harriet Macurdy, Pioneering Feminist Classical Scholar*

Our six brief presentations on this panel celebrate and contextualize a groundbreaking biography published by The Ohio State University Press in 2017, *The Drunken Duchess of Vassar: Grace Harriet Macurdy, Pioneering Feminist Classical Scholar* by the late Barbara McManus (1942-2015). In 2011, CAAS established a leadership award to honor McManus’ vision and contributions, particularly as its president and webmaster. The achievements recognized by the McManus award—innovative teaching and research on gender, pedagogical and scholarly advocacy for women and minorities—distinguished not only McManus’ own professional career, but also that of her subject, Grace Harriet Macurdy (1866-1946), who taught at Vassar College here in the CAAS region from 1893 through 1937, the final twenty-one years as Professor of Greek.

The first woman classicist whose scholarship focused on ancient Greek and Roman women’s lives, Macurdy came from an economically disadvantaged, working-class immigrant family, and struggled with physical disability for decades. Yet she became a prolific, internationally renowned Greek scholar after receiving a BA from Harvard’s Radcliffe Annex in 1888, winning a fellowship to study in Berlin, and, while teaching full-time at Vassar, earning a PhD from Columbia (where she also taught for several summers) in 1903. Through Macurdy’s eyes and experiences, McManus’ biography also explores such significant topics as women’s higher education, the marginalized role of women’s colleges in academic politics, and the evolution of classics as a discipline and profession, from the late 19th through the mid-20th century. Along with foregrounding McManus’ discussion of both Macurdy’s life and these larger issues, our presenters ask new questions, and offer new information, about McManus’ impressive findings and insights in *The Drunken Duchess*, considering the directions for further research this book proposes.

Over a period of many years, McManus shared her research on Macurdy with feminist historians in the New York Women’s Writing Women’s Lives Biography Seminar and the Family History Group. Our first presenter, an eminent specialist in ancient Greco-Roman women’s history, represents this influential collegial community in relating how McManus’ book took shape as a scholarly project. Our next two presenters draw on material in the Vassar archives to provide a richer context for Macurdy’s career as teacher and researcher. One casts further light on Macurdy’s colleague Elizabeth Hazleton Haight (1872-1964), a Vassar alumna who became Professor of Latin and curator of the Vassar Classical Museum, contrasting Haight’s efforts at popularizing ancient prose fiction with Macurdy’s devotion to scholarship for specialists. The other investigates Macurdy’s own instruction and research, particularly in connection with her books *Hellenistic Queens: A Study of Woman Power in Macedonia, Seleucid Syria, and Ptolemaic Egypt* (Johns Hopkins 1932) and *Vassal Queens and Some Contemporary Women in the Roman Empire* (Johns Hopkins 1937); it compares current work on women in antiquity by feminist faculty at Vassar and Macurdy’s foundational studies to address continuities and changes in classicist feminist research and pedagogy.
The fourth presenter reflects on difficulties faced by women classical scholars in the early twentieth century US, not only Macurdy’s own successful struggles with both male prejudice and opposition from her jealous older Vassar colleague Abby Leach, but also those encountered by two of her students: Ida Carleton Thallon, ’97, and Elizabeth Pierce, ’10, whom Macurdy affectionately mentored. Their story of lesbian devotion found resolution in the marriages of the two women to two archaeologists—Thallon to Bert Hodge Hill and Pierce to Carl Blegen—and communal happiness lasting their entire life.

Our fifth presentation is by the acquiring editor at The Ohio State University Press, who received selected chapters of The Drunken Duchess from McManus in late 2014, “became hooked by this engaging history” and invited the entire manuscript in for peer review without realizing that she was already in home hospice care by the time it arrived. Characterizing the experience of working with the “cheerful, positive” Barbara McManus as “a dream assignment”, this presenter describes the challenges of finishing the book, a tribute to both Macurdy and McManus. The last presentation, by the two classicists who finalized the manuscript of the book, deals with the book’s foreword and postscript; it also contextualizes Macurdy’s professional accomplishments by comparing her—as feminist, teacher and classical scholar—with those of her female classicist contemporaries at other women’s colleges.