

Eulogy for Professor Virginia Brown

St. Basils Church, Toronto
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It is a particular honor to be able to say a few words in memory of Virginia and I thank James Hankins for his kind invitation.

Virginia began her illustrious career at the Pontifical Institute in 1970, almost at the same time as I entered University College as a freshman. Though our paths were not destined to intersect until 1978, I was aware of her formidable reputation in the field of manuscript studies, both as a scholar of incisive intellect and as a teacher who had high expectations of her students. In 1978, as a graduate student in the Department of Classics, I discussed with my then supervisor my desire to pursue dissertation work in the field of classical reception, and, *horresco referens*, medieval Latin. “Well,” he said, “I think you shall need to talk to Virginia Brown and take her course on textual editing.” Now those of us of a certain age well remember Virginia’s seminar on the *Sapientiale* of Thomas of York; indeed it has become legendary. With some trepidation I proceeded to the PIMS and knocked on Virginia’s door, there to encounter possibly the most generous, kindest, engaging, amusing, and, perceptive scholar I have been fortunate to meet in the academy. Over the next 31 years, Virginia became not only an inspiring and gifted teacher, but also a mentor and a true friend. I am sure I speak for all her former students when I say that she was much loved and will be truly missed.

As a teacher and dissertation supervisor, Virginia was exemplary and a true professional. She pushed her students to reach their potential, and she had extremely high expectations. In her inimitable way, she intimated to me as I began my research on Ovid, “Now, Mr. Coulson, I think we shall need to inspect all of the manuscripts of the *Metamorphoses* to ensure that we have uncovered all known witnesses to our text.” Yet even at this early stage, where our relationship was much more formal, Virginia’s delightful eccentricities were apparent: her love for cherry coke, her abiding passion for American football and for that legendary coach of the Ohio State Buckeyes, Woody Hayes. In 1978, Woody had the misfortune to assault a football player on an opposing team. That week, during our weekly meeting to prepare for general exams, Virginia gave me the full story on Woody as the bad boy of college football. Little did I know at the time this entry to the world of the Buckeyes was to come full circle, since I have spent my career at OSU, and indeed got to shake the hand of the legend himself. It is the only time I have seen Virginia pea green with envy.

But Virginia was not only a truly gifted and inspiring class-room teacher, she was also someone who cared deeply about her students and who followed their career after graduation with an abiding concern. This was brought home to me in numerous ways in my early days as an assistant professor. At the APA meetings in Toronto in 1985, Virginia was the only professor to take the time to have coffee with me, ask me how my research was progressing, and make suggestions about how I might get those important early articles out. One of her suggestions was

to write an article on the biographical tradition on Ovid, in which I would include new *accessus* to Ovid discovered in the course of my research. The article eventually appeared in the pages of *Mediaeval Studies* and underwent the razor sharp knife of her editing. Those of us in this room who have felt the imprint of Virginia's editing will know what I mean when I say this was a truly humbling and salutary experience. Yet 20 years later, one looks back at an article with true admiration for Virginia as editor: such clarity, precision, with not a comma out of place. Through the long and arduous process, Virginia never lost her sense of humor or perspective. I still recall with fondness and gratitude her comments on the penultimate draft: "Frank, you will notice the editor has made some suggestions for improvements in the margins. Those I insist upon, I have already implemented." And it is to Virginia's great wit that I owe the title of the article: "Frank, I think we should call this article: 'Hitherto Unedited Medieval and Renaissance Lives of Ovid, Part One.' That'll really get 'em."

As the years progressed and I made my way up the rungs of the academic ladder, Virginia never ceased to be a solicitous voice. She was a devoted friend to the Center for Epigraphical and Palaeographical Studies at The Ohio State University, giving numerous lectures and willingly sharing her love for the "precious script" with undergraduate and graduate students, all of whom responded warmly to her humor, knowledge, and southern charm. It was, of course, part of Virginia's great humanity that she made friends not only with scholars and students, but with everyone she met: secretaries, janitors, security guards.

Virginia not only shared generously with her students her vast erudition, she also gave us another precious gift: her enduring enjoyment of life. Nowhere was this trait more in evidence than when Virginia took a trip, always in search of those elusive Beneventan fragments. She considered the great state of Ohio "the promised land" because it was home to Otto Ege, that infamous collector of manuscripts from Cleveland. Well do I remember a particularly memorable trip Virginia and I took to Toledo. At the Art Museum there, Virginia found a Beneventan fragment she had been long searching for. But of course being Virginia, we also marched off to the Toledo Public Library where the curator informed her: "A friend of Otto Ege's daughter won a jackpot on the original 'Jeopardy' show in the 1960s and bought Ege fragments with the money." Virginia's face was aglow, and we proceeded, like the intrepid Miss Marple and Hercule Poirot, to track down and to examine all 20 fragments now hanging on her walls.

All of us who were touched by Virginia in her role as teacher, mentor, editor and scholar were delighted to see that in her final decade she received the accolades and honors she so richly deserved. A Kilham Fellowship from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the highest honor that the agency can bestow; the teaching award from the Medieval Academy of America, bestowed upon her at the meetings in Miami in 2005, where it was noted that Virginia distilled a tradition of palaeography which led from Traube, though E. A. Lowe to the present day; a *Festschrift* volume from Brepols published in 2008; and a "Homage to Virginia Brown" held at Cassino in 2008. It is also with great fondness that I recall Virginia's attendance at the symposium held at Ohio State in 2005 to honor her on the occasion of her 65th Birthday, attended by her colleagues and former students, including Marjorie Curry Woods, Richard Gyug, Charles Hilken, and Greti Dinkova-Bruun.

We who had the privilege of being taught by Virginia are deeply saddened by the loss of a wonderful human being, one who has left us too soon. But I am comforted in the knowledge that Virginia led a life so richly lived and richly loved. Her legacy of scholarship in the fields of manuscript studies and classical reception lives on in the many students she trained, and in the fellowships endowed in her honor. It was truly a remarkable experience to have known Virginia and to have shared for so many years her passion for life.