

## HARRISON T. MESEROLE

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## In Memoriam

by  
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We are here today to celebrate the life of Harry Meserole, Distinguished Professor of English and Abell Professor of Liberal Arts emeritus. We knew Harry as a loved one, friend, colleague, teacher, mentor, orchid breeder, dog lover, Dairy Queen habitue, and/or Texas lottery devotee. I shall speak of the Harry I knew—a role model, colleague, collaborator, and—above all—friend. Harry was what we once called a gentleman-scholar and a scholar-teacher; indeed, I like to think of him as a scholar's scholar and a bibliographer's bibliographer. His passion for accuracy in the smallest detail and his unselfish delight in sharing his immense learning set a standard that his colleagues and students aspired to but never attained.

Let me explain why I called Harry a scholar's scholar. As editor and bibliographer, the majority of Harry's publications were designed to serve the profession of English at large rather than merely advance his career. His *American Poetry of the Seventeenth Century* (which went through 4 editions between 1968 and 1985 and is still in-print) remains the standard edition. Leo Lemay (the reigning Colonial American literature scholar), in assessing the importance of the edition, asserted that only two other scholars "have done as much original work in seventeenth-century American poetry as Harry Meserole."

Outside of the field of early American literature, Harry was best known in the profession as a bibliographer. Indeed, as I noted earlier he was a bibliographer's bibliographer; that is, he articulated bibliographical principles and practices that were widely emulated, and he set standards that many tried vainly to meet. Anyone who ever visited his office would immediately realize that Harry was a bibliographer: his desk was piled high with stacks of notecards,

letters, publishers' catalogs, page proofs, and sheets filled with copious notes. To the uninitiated, these teetering stacks seemed a meaningless jumble of miscellaneous pieces of paper, but Harry knew precisely where every note, letter, or citation resided in each stack.

From 1957 to 1975, Harry edited the *MLA International Bibliography*, the indispensable annual bibliography of scholarship published worldwide (in more than 100 languages) on all modern languages and literatures, linguistics, and folklore. As you might imagine, editing this protean work required someone who commanded a broad and deep knowledge of languages and literatures, possessed a prodigious memory, and required little sleep. Characteristically, Harry reorganized the rather haphazard classification system he inherited, dramatically expanded the coverage, and late in his tenure initiated the computerization of the *Bibliography*. (I shall have more to say about Harry and computers in a moment.) The result was a vastly improved essential and enduring resource for researchers worldwide. The importance of Harry's herculean contribution to this indispensable work becomes clearer when we recall that during his editorship the *Bibliography* was based on contributions by a worldwide network of scholars, many of whom volunteered out of respect for Harry. There was only one paid contributor—Priscilla Letterman, his assistant.

Harry's editorship of the *Bibliography* led to his participation in one of his least-known but nonetheless important publications: the second edition of *The MLA Style Sheet*, a predecessor of the *MLA Handbook*, the style bible for those who publish on literary topics and for two generations of freshmen composition students.

After relinquishing the editorship of the *MLA International Bibliography*, Harry was recruited as editor of the annual *World Shakespeare Bibliography*, which he edited from 1976 to 1992. Once again, he immediately set about reorganizing the bibliography and expanding its scope. And, once again he brought a bibliography into the computer age by working with programmers to design a program and record structure that has migrated through several platforms and still serves as the cyberinfrastructure of the award-winning *World Shakespeare Bibliography Online*. Harry's farsightedness in creating one of the first humanities databases is all the more remarkable since he himself never used a computer. In all the years we shared the same office suite, I recall seeing him touch only *one* computer key *one* time!

Despite the demands of his editorial positions, Harry found time to write the American literature portions of *A Guide to English and American Literature*, co-authored with F. W. Bateson. An evaluative, frequently trenchant, survey of the best editions and criticism of important authors as well as reference works, literary histories, anthologies, and special studies, the *Guide* is now outdated but it has never been superseded, and will not be until another Harry Meserole steps forward. Appropriately, Harry's accomplishments as bibliographer and editor were recognized by his receipt of the Cecil Oldman Medal in Bibliography in 1978.

How did Harry accomplish so much that is of such lasting importance to the profession? His memory was prodigious, his learning was deep and broad, his capacity for strong coffee was seemingly bottomless, he was able to write or dictate with minimal revision, and for 28 years he had Priscilla, the best collaborator one could hope for.

The depth and breadth of Harry's learning was legendary among both students and colleagues. Let me illustrate this with two anecdotes. In my first semester at A&M, I met a graduate student, who, learning that I shared an office suite with Harry, breathlessly exclaimed, "You're so lucky. He's the smartest man alive!" The second anecdote I hope to see immortalized one day in a John Updike novel or short story. In the early 1990s I was invited to participate in a symposium at which John Updike was the featured speaker. Soon after deplaning at the Columbia, South Carolina, airport, I met Harry's friend Matt Bruccolli who was there to transport participants to our hotel. When I told Matt that I brought greetings from Harry, Matt—in his characteristically booming voice—exclaimed, "Harry Meserole—the only [expletive deleted] man smarter than I am." Needless to say, this startled a number of nearby people, including Mr. Updike who was just emerging from the jetway. Let me supplement these anecdotes with a telling fact: in 1960 Harry was appointed an assistant professor at Penn State; in 1965, he was promoted to full professor. In academe, we sometimes speak of a very bright assistant professor as being on the fast track toward tenure and promotion; moving from assistant to full professor in five years is the equivalent of an academic sub-four-minute mile.

Harry was unselfishly generous in sharing his knowledge, expertise, and editorial pencil with students and colleagues. Harry's door was always open for his students. Since our office suite on the sixth floor of Blocker was rather

compact, I could not help but overhear Harry talking with students. I marveled at his patience with several whom I would have ushered out as quickly as possible. I am aware of only one time that Harry became impatient with a student (and this I know only by report since it happened at Penn State). As I already mentioned, Harry was one of the editors of the second edition of the *MLA Style Sheet*, which prescribed that writers should “*Never* fasten the pages [of a manuscript] with more than a paper clip.” A student in his bibliography and research methods course, knowing his penchant for accuracy in the smallest detail, repeatedly came to his office to inquire about the size of the paper clip, its shape and material of composition, and its precise placement in inches from the margin of the sheets. Rumor has it that Harry finally became exasperated at the student’s third visit!

For many of us gathered here, Harry’s perceptive reading of a manuscript saved us from embarrassing lapses in logic, factual errors, and ill-phrased circumlocutions.

Great scholars are not always great teachers, but Harry was, and like the best of the great teachers, he was both respected and revered by his students. And, like all great scholar-teachers Harry knew that his legacy would be the students he taught rather than his publications. And what a legacy it is: in the course of his career Harry directed the dissertations of thirty-nine students, many of whom contributed essays to *Early American Literature and Culture: Essays Honoring Harrison T. Meserole*. In the United States only the legendary scholar-teachers are now honored with such a Festschrift. The lasting impact that Harry had on his students is best summarized by Stephen Yarbrough (who was also Harry’s colleague at A&M): “To send Harry a poorly written essay is . . . unthinkable. . . . To be churlish with one’s colleagues once one has had Harry for a colleague, to be stingy with one’s students when one has had Harry for a teacher, is unthinkable. He is, simply, a living standard that one does not forget.”

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