

ARTICLE

## Barbara Cooper: A Biographical Essay

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It all started with a snail. When I asked Barbara Cooper if she could identify the point at which she began to be interested in France, she thought for a moment and then recalled her sixth grade teacher, Miss Dufresne, who raised snails. One day, Miss Dufresne brought a container of snails to class and invited each of the children to take one home. Not knowing how to sex a snail, Barbara's father suggested she name the pet "Johnmarypete." As it turned out, snails are hermaphrodites, so the name was appropriate. Barbara was to remember Miss Dufresne, the few words of French that she taught her students, and Johnmarypete many years later when, during her first trip to France, she first saw snails on a plate. She did not partake of the delicacy. But I'm getting ahead of myself. Let's return to Barbara's childhood.

The eldest of three children and the only daughter, Barbara Cooper (née Gordon) was reared in a suburb of Chicago where she attended public schools and enjoyed the occasional outing to a musical comedy with her parents. Only once does she recall playing a role in a school play—as a seal (yes, a seal!) in a play that was performed when she was in the seventh or eighth grade. Presumably, it was not a speaking role, although as a seal she almost certainly had to clap, something that would serve her well as an audience member in countless theatrical productions. "I had no talent," she replies when I ask her if she had ever aspired to be an actress. As for French, she began the study of the language in the ninth grade. Why French? Perhaps because her mother had studied French as a young girl, and also—perhaps above all—because it was understood to be the language of culture. Barbara recalls with fondness her first French teacher, Miss Cleveland, an ebullient young woman fresh out of college who, besides stimulating the students by her own enthusiastic and skillful teaching, also took them to plays performed by *Le Tréteaux de Paris*, a touring company that provided employment for out-of-work French actors. Barbara's interest in French drama was thus awakened very early on. Of the first play the young people attended, a performance of Ionesco's *La Cantatrice chauve* performed at nearby Northwestern University, Barbara says that she understood very little beyond the fact that it was "magical." From the theatre of the absurd, her initiation into the wonders of theatre continued the following year with a performance of *Huis Clos* by Jean-Paul Sartre. She understood a bit more this time: she was, after all, a year older. Unfortunately, these theatre out-ings were to cease during her last two years of high school, as she had a strict teacher whose idea of extra-curricular enrichment was hours and hours of homework. Many students dropped French at this point but Barbara stayed with it and even continued her study of French in college. Why? She attributes her dogged perseverance to a stubborn streak and an eagerness to take on challenges. Whatever the case, we her colleagues are grateful indeed that she did not allow herself to be intimidated into dropping French in the eleventh grade, as so many of her classmates did.

At the University of Wisconsin in Madison, Barbara first declared French and English as majors, then, after spending her junior year in France, was forced to downgrade English to a minor in order to graduate in four years. The study abroad year—a “miracle” says Barbara, because she had never expected to be able to participate—remains one of Barbara’s most vivid memories, well worth the successful effort at creative financing (student loans, parental contributions, patiently saved wages from summer jobs). The adventure began with the road trip from Chicago to New York as her entire family delivered her to the ship that would take her to France, ship travel being at the time considerably less expensive than transatlantic flights. The MS Aurelia docked first at Southampton, then at Le Havre, where Barbara was to disembark. Of that crossing, which lasted over a week, Barbara remembers two areas of discomfort: 1) her seasickness (the Aurelia was a small ship, and Dramamine wasn’t always effective); and 2) the Italian sailors who took pleasure in ogling the female passengers, especially from below when women wearing skirts ascended from one deck to the next. Although spectatorship would eventually come to be a topic of great interest to the soon-to-be-famous drama scholar, this was one sort of spectator she did not appreciate!

Wisconsin’s Junior Year Abroad program, directed that year by Professor Alexander Kroff, a *dix-neuviémiste*, was in Aix-en-Provence, but the group was treated to several days in Paris upon arrival. Paris!! As the tour bus reserved for the group lumbered past Notre-Dame, the Eiffel Tower, the Louvre and other famous sites in the “City of Lights” that Barbara never dreamed she would see, she remembers being so overwhelmed with gratitude and disbelief that the tears began to flow. She also recalls, with recognition now of its formative influence, that Dr. Kroff, who had a special interest in theatre, took the students to see two performances during their brief stay in Paris, one at the Comédie-Française and another at the Opéra-Comique. In Aix, Barbara’s fluency in French placed her in a small group of American students who were permitted to enroll in *propédeutique* courses with native speakers. These university classes, designed to prepare students of the French educational system for tertiary instruction, were especially demanding and Barbara remembers being “hugely intimidated” by them. Nevertheless, she performed well. Nor was her education in France limited to the classroom. Among the extra-curricular lessons she was to retain was that the best way to trap a mouse was with French chocolate, a considerably more effective method than the use of French cheeses!

From then on, Barbara’s academic trajectory was predictable. Wisconsin, eager to keep this talented French major who had spent her junior year abroad, spoke fluent French and had been inducted into Phi Beta Kappa to boot, offered Barbara a graduate fellowship, and she stayed around long enough to earn, not only an M.A. but a Ph.D. Along the way she met Wallace Cooper, the man who would become her husband, in (should we be surprised?) a course on French Romantic theatre taught by Professor Kroff! When, one year into their relationship, Wally announced that he had won a Fulbright Scholarship and would be leaving for France for a year to be an *assistant d’anglais* at the Lycée Charlemagne in Paris, Barbara retorted in characteristic fashion, “Well, you’re not going without me!” Not knowing what she would do when she got there, she accompanied him to Paris where, thanks to her own energy and determination, and with a good dose of serendipity thrown in, she quickly found a position as an assistante d’anglais at the Ecole normale d’institutrices on the Boulevard des Batignolles. Her success in finding an English teaching position so quickly was all the more remarkable when one considers that at the time there was a distinct preference in France for British English. Barbara remembers that although

she overcame the “handicap” of her American English to land the job, her accent remained a source of consternation for her students.

It was during that year in Paris that Barbara and Wally were married and a lifelong partnership was forged. Barbara writes that Wally “helped me survive prelims and much more.” (Note: The “much more” part continues right down to the present, and it is rare to see Barbara at a conference these days without spotting her helpmate mingling amiably with the conference-goers or seated discreetly at the back of the room as she delivers her papers.)

Back on campus at Madison, Barbara continued work on her Ph.D., all the while serving, with Wally, as director of la Maison Française. Courses in French drama—not merely of the seventeenth and twentieth centuries, which continue to be part of the core curricula of most graduate programs, but other periods as well—were popular at the time, and Barbara, having developed a particular fondness for nineteenth-century theatre, chose this area for her Ph.D. dissertation. “Mérimee, dramaturge, devant la critique, 1825-1970” was directed by Professor Kroff. After completing her Ph.D. in 1974, Barbara taught summer classes at Roosevelt University in Chicago for two summers, then accepted a Visiting Professorship at Kenyon College in Ohio for four years. When a tenure-track position opened up at the University of New Hampshire in 1978, she applied for it and was hired. And this time she stayed put. Her retirement in May, 2012, at the rank of Full Professor, marked the end of her thirty-fourth year at UNH.

Throughout her career, Barbara has been fiercely faithful to her chosen field, working tirelessly to stimulate interest in nineteenth-century French theatre. She notes ruefully that early in the 1970s, with the growing importance of modern French literary theory, nineteenth-century theatre fell out of favor with scholars, research in the field languished, and university courses devoted to the topic were few and far between. Ignoring dire warnings that her specialty would limit her career and publishing options, Barbara remained passionate about her chosen field of endeavor and pursued her research in this area. Although she has no regrets, she does lament the fact that for much of her career, there was a near-total disconnect between her classroom topics and her research, all the more so because her teaching career played out at institutions that have no graduate programs in French. When she was able, she solved the problem by sneaking one or more plays into her literature courses before, near the end of her career, finally managing to offer a French Drama in Translation course entitled “Love in Disguise.” The course covered drama from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries. Her creative approach to teaching, together with her already established scholarly reputation, won for her the coveted Lindberg Award as the Outstanding Scholar-Teacher in the College of Liberal Arts at UNH for the academic year 1988-89.

I met Barbara at Duke University, at the opening reception of the tenth annual Colloquium in Nineteenth-Century French Studies, organized by Jean-Jacques Thomas. It was 1984. Feeling very much like a fish out of water, sipping my drink as I moved among clusters of people who seemed to me to belong to a club of which I was not a member, I eavesdropped on a conversation between two young *dix-neuviémistes*. One of them, a slender, pretty woman with a *coiffure gamine*, was describing the sense of exclusion and inadequacy she had experienced during a conference she had attended in France (as an observer rather than a participant) a short time earlier. I turned to look at her. Here was a woman who appeared to be more or less my age, and *she had attended a conference in France!* It seemed unfathomable to

me. At the same time, I identified with the feelings of unease she was describing, feelings that I was having at that very moment. I joined the conversation, and it was on that day that our friendship was born. Barbara and I would go on to co-edit two scholarly collections and to head the Nineteenth-Century French Studies Colloquia Committee as Secretary and President respectively from 1985 to 2000. In the early years, we read and critiqued each other's work, rehearsed our NCFS conference papers together, bucked each other up and never failed to attend each other's sessions. We helped each other out in many different ways. I shall always be grateful to Barbara for enabling me to reach the required enrollment figure for a program in Paris I was to direct in the spring of 2001: because UNH did not have a semester program in France and because the university-wide program I was directing had no French prerequisites, she was able to recruit three UNH students for me without being disloyal to her own institution—and she did! With our husbands, Barbara and I have also seen each other outside the academic context. Barbara and Wally have been guests in our home in Media, Pennsylvania; and Lance and I have enjoyed the Coopers' hospitality (and the products of Wally's culinary expertise) in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. I even remember—now this was a very long time ago—taking time out from a conference to visit Barbara's childhood home outside of Chicago, where I met her mother. In more recent years, our friendship has taken on a less "professional" cast and we tend, in our regular e-mail correspondence, to share photographs and details of our daily lives. We never forget birthdays.

I once said somewhat flippantly, introducing a very distinguished scholar who had come to my university to deliver a lecture, that while most people arise in the morning and put on the coffee, she probably headed straight to her computer to update her CV. About Barbara Cooper, who arises at an hour when most of us are still fast asleep and who needs no caffeine to wake her up (she does not, in fact, drink coffee, or tea either, for that matter), I think I could make the same remark, in this case quite accurately and without flippancy. Barbara tells me that during those wee hours, she's actually scouring the Internet for material that might be useful for her research projects or classes, checking in with friends on both sides of the Atlantic, and reading the news. As a frequent recipient of her 3 a.m. e-mails, I suspect she's telling the truth. However, given the extraordinary level of her professional activity, I'm also convinced that those CV updates must take place on a nearly daily basis. Armed with a recent CV, I toted up the publications and came up with the following figures: 78 articles (of which four were selected for reprint); the two co-edited collections mentioned earlier; an edited volume on theatre; an edited issue of a well-known French academic journal; six editions of French or francophone works (novels and plays), including two novels in English translation by Alexandre Dumas, a play by Pixérécourt and several works for L'Harmattan's collection, "Autrement Mêmes." This collection makes available to the public texts of different genres dating from the eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; these works, typically written by European authors, most often include themes of racial difference and colonial life. Rounding out her scholarly profile are 39 book reviews and ninety-plus conference presentations, increasingly abroad (mostly in France) and increasingly by invitation. Barbara has delivered talks in the USA, Canada, France, Ireland, Italy, Portugal and England. When I asked her recently if she had ever suffered from stage fright, she answered in the negative, crediting her serenity to an experience she had the very first time she read a paper at a conference. Seated at the conference table, she watched as a well-published senior scholar rose tensely to the podium to read her paper, knees knocking. Somehow, this woman's nervousness had a calming effect on Barbara, and from that moment, she read her papers

with an equanimity I can only envy. Having heard her speak on several occasions, I can attest to the fact that she speaks with authority and poise, often including self-deprecating asides that make her audiences smile. While it is true that she frequently treats obscure works with which few members of her audience are familiar, necessitating some plot summary, the truly remarkable thing about Barbara's papers is that they are always lively and interesting, and exquisite demonstrations of her talent for research. She inevitably hints at the historical significance of the work she is discussing, often flattering her audiences by leaving it up to them to connect the dots. Describing her own critical stance, she says modestly, "If I'm good at anything, it's close reading and connecting text to context. I'm not good at sweeping conclusions." I can think of nobody who would dispute her talent for textual exegesis and informed contextualization. Barbara is far too meticulous a scholar to leap to conclusions that she cannot support, but her always detailed and insightful readings of individual works do evoke issues that far transcend the text in question.

Barbara's first article, an *état présent* of scholarship on Mérimée's romantic theatre, found a home in the pages of *Nineteenth-Century French Studies*. The year was 1977. She went on to publish on the theatre of known writers (Barbier, Dumas, Hugo, Musset, Pixérécourt, Vigny) and lesser-known ones (Ancelot, Hippolyte Bis, Alexandre Duval, Lemercier, Lœillard d'Avrigny, August Ricard, Vitet), reading outside the canon long before such an activity became trendy. Her passion for early nineteenth-century theatre, well suited to her talent for sleuthing, has often taken her to the dusty archives of Parisian and provincial libraries where she has spent countless hours poring over manuscripts, censorship reports and reviews of forgotten plays from that era, some popular in their time, others never performed. Although she has a special interest in romantic drama, her research spans the theatrical genres: comedy (including vaudeville productions), Restoration-era tragedy, melodrama and dramatized monologues. Examining the plays from every possible perspective, she has focused on dialogue, casting, symbolism, staging, and critical reception. Whatever her angle, she brings to light revealing details that have historical significance, readily confessing that many of the plays she studies have limited literary value. Their social value and their worth as historical documents, on the other hand, are often incalculable, and it is this historical significance that she generally seeks to illuminate in her research.

Although theatre remains her first love, Barbara Cooper has not limited herself to this genre, as her editions of *The Three Musketeers* and *Man in the Iron Mask* amply demonstrate. More-over, since 2002, which marked the 200th anniversary of Alexandre Dumas's birth, she has steadily honed her credentials as a Dumas scholar, thanks largely to the encouragement of the late Fernande Bassan who drew her attention to Dumas père's theatre and who introduced Barbara to a group of Dumas scholars in France. Among others, Claude Schopp, also known as "Monsieur Dumas," has been particularly welcoming and generous. Barbara's research on Dumas, an author with family ties to the French colony of Saint-Domingue, led her to develop an interest in literature dealing with co-colonialism and racial difference. For the French publisher L'Harmattan, she has edited an 1840 play dealing with the earthquake that devastated parts of Martinique in 1839 (*Le Tremblement de Terre de la Martinique*); an 1861 play by Jules Barbier, *Cora ou l'Esclavage*, a portrait of racial segregation in Louisiana at the beginning of the American Civil War; and *La Traite des noirs*, a play set in areas that supplied slaves to France. Until she edited them, all of these plays had been out of print for almost 100 years and were virtually unknown to twenty-first century readers.

There have been many independent testimonials to Barbara's renown as a world-class scholar of nineteenth-century French theatre and an expert on Alexandre Dumas' drama. Her positions on two editorial boards (*Nineteenth-Century French Studies* and *Cahiers Alexandre Dumas*); her 1991-92 fellowship from the National Endowment for the Humanities; the University of New Hampshire Humanities Center Senior Faculty Fellowship; her election to associate membership in LIRE, a joint research group in 18th- and 19th- century literature at the Université Lumière (Lyon II) and the CNRS (National Center for Scientific Research); her invited participation in the bicentennial celebrations of Musset, Dumas, Scribe and Vigny in France; her frequent invitations to evaluate manuscripts, foreign language programs, promotion and tenure dossiers; her invitations to speak in France; her selection by the Gale Publishing Group to edit a volume of the *Dictionary of Literary Biography* devoted primarily to nineteenth-century French dramatists (a task she carried out with characteristic thoroughness in 1998); her editing of a special issue of the prestigious *Revue d'histoire du théâtre*, to name but a few, offer compelling evidence of her sterling reputation in the community of French scholars.

Most of us have had colleagues, highly productive and famed in their field of endeavor, who have built their reputations on the backs of the departmental work horses, faculty so burdened with service obligations that they have little time for scholarship. Jetting off to international conferences at every opportunity, these academic stars are always too busy to do their department's heavy lifting. Barbara's CV demonstrates emphatically that, despite her increasingly frequent international travel, she was not among those who eschew teaching and departmental responsibilities. She chaired the Department of French and Italian for six years (1983 to 1989), then, following consolidation, chaired the larger Department of Languages, Literatures and Cultures, for another three (1997-2000). Additionally, she has shouldered her share of the "usual" duties generally undertaken by faculty: thesis supervision, advising, course coordination, membership in departmental and university committees. Outside the Department, she served several terms as Vice President of the New Hampshire Chapter of the American Association of Teachers of French. The extremely time-consuming organization of the Nineteenth-Century French Studies Colloquium, which drew some 200 scholars from several countries to UNH and involved students from her own campus as assistants, was a significant contribution in the area of service, occupying the bulk of her time in 1989. But it is in the extraordinary initiatives she has taken that her service is the most exemplary. The founder and director of UNH's Summer Language Study Program in Brest, France, she also directed the UNH junior year in France program in Dijon, was instrumental in founding a Departmental Pedagogical Forum, a Faculty Research Forum, a French Lecture/Film Series, and a French Department Career Night Program. She was an active member of the UNH chapter of Phi Beta Kappa and served several terms as an officer of that honor society. She also helped create the Center for International Education at UNH and regularly taught courses for the UNH Honors Program. Her firm belief in the importance for her students of direct contact with French culture, which stems from the transformative experience she had herself as an undergraduate during that year in Aix, has led her to promote not only study abroad but also cultural service projects undertaken annually by student members of the French National Honor Society, Pi Delta Phi, whose local chapter, Mu Xi, was established on the campus of UNH in 1999 thanks to her initiative. Among the projects for which her students have raised money through a very creative raffle were the purchase of trees for the gardens at Versailles after the devastating tornado of 1999; restoration of the ramparts of the château de Saumur; the placement of a commemora-

tive plaque on a building in Portsmouth, New Hampshire in which French military officers had been billeted during the American War of Independence; restoration of the château de Lunéville following a major fire; support for students and faculty in the French program at Dillard University in New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina, aid to Haitian schools after the 2010 earthquake, and restoration of a municipal theatre in Briennon-sur-Armançon (Burgundy). In these projects, and others, Barbara's goal was two-fold: first, in her own modest way, she wanted to help to improve Franco-American relationships (and by all accounts she was successful; the French recipients of the awards were thrilled that an American student group had taken an interest in their projects); and secondly, she wished to give to the student members of Pi Delta Phi a sense of belonging to francophone culture and to enable them to experience the reality of the language, people, and culture that they had previously encountered only in books. In some cases, contemporary history inspired the choice of a project. For example, it was during the Gulf War, when the French refusal to participate earned them such scornful epithets as "cheese-eating surrender monkeys" that Barbara came up with the idea of a plaque honoring French participants in the US War of Independence, thus reminding the students that the French had a history of support for American causes and did not deserve the disrespect that was being meted out to them. On a couple of occasions, student members studying abroad actually visited the recipients of the chapter's monetary aid and were warmly received, leaving them with an unforgettable cross-cultural experience. If I linger on these projects, it is in the hope that those readers of this essay who are still toiling in the field of academe will be inspired to emulate Barbara's wonderful example of creatively forged contacts between France and the USA. Small wonder that she should have won the UNH Award for Excellence in International Engagement in 2005 or that the French government would have seen fit, as early as 1994, to bestow upon her the title of "Chevalier" in the Order of French Academic Palms.

One of the tasks to which most professors give little attention—it does not, after all, fit neatly into one's CV, rarely reaps material rewards and is not quantifiable—is mentoring. Barbara is tireless in sharing information with colleagues, be they contemporaries or younger faculty. Now, mentoring can take many different forms. Leaving aside manuscript evaluation—Barbara's certainly done her share of that—Barbara's mentoring activities are second nature to her. I speak from experience. Through the years, she has bought me books related to my research—a novel featuring a physician-character by Gaboriau when I was researching medical allusions in the nineteenth-century French novel; a theatrical adaptation of *Bel-Ami* when I was working on Maupassant, to name but two. She has been my go-to when I've been unable to find information about some of the more esoteric aspects of early nineteenth-century French literature and culture. On countless occasions, she has sent me articles and reviews she felt would be helpful to me. I naively thought that I was the only recipient of her generous information-sharing until recently, when I had dinner in Paris with a former student who had been encouraged by Barbara to pursue a master's degree at the University of Delaware, where I taught, after completing his undergraduate major at UNH. Now embarked upon a Ph.D. in French at Yale, he was one of the most gifted students I had ever taught, and I remained grateful to Barbara for sending him to us. It was over profiteroles that our conversation turned to Barbara, and I learned—with some embarrassment, for my contact with him had been somewhat sporadic since he left for Yale—that his old UNH prof sends him a steady stream of information (articles, bibliographical references) in connection with the thesis that he is in the

throes of writing. Barbara puts into practice her belief that—and I quote her here—“sharing and mentoring are the most important things we do in teaching and in research.”

From the string of pearls she wears around her neck even when she’s dressed casually, to the *symphonie en blanc majeur* (pace Gautier) of her flower garden, and finally to the pet wire-haired fox terriers which have shared her life for as long as I’ve known her, Barbara shows a predilection for the color white, but one that has never extended to *la page blanche*. Even though a review of the thousands of e-mails she has sent to me over the past decades would reveal often-repeated lamentations about the difficulty of getting words onto paper and the sense of panic provoked by looming deadlines, the fact is that the words do get out, the work does get done, and the pages do not remain white.

And this brings me back to the snail. How ironic that Barbara’s introduction to French culture began with a creature associated with languorous movement! The rapid-fire pace of Barbara’s publications, scarcely interrupted several years ago when she suffered a medical *contretemps* that would have laid low lesser mortals, has been a source of wonder and admiration to her colleagues for a long time. In retirement, Barbara will continue to live the life of a fully-engaged academic. Already, she has four speaking engagements lined up for the coming year: two in France, one in Sweden, and one in Portugal. And she has no fewer than six editions “in the works,” three for L’Harmattan and three for Garnier. A scholar through and through, Barbara Cooper remains an inspiration to both friends and colleagues, and it is with respect and affection that the contributors to this volume—all of us recipients of her generous mentoring in one way or another—dedicate this collection to her.