



IN MEMORIAM

Janet Adelman
Professor of English, Emerita
UC Berkeley
1941 — 2010

Janet Adelman, an eminent Shakespeare scholar and pioneering feminist psychoanalytic critic, died at home of lung cancer on April 6, 2010. During her 39 years as a faculty member in the Department of English at the University of California, Berkeley, she inspired generations of students and colleagues with her rare insight into the heart of literary texts and human experience.

Born in Mt. Kisco, New York, on January 28, 1941, Janet graduated summa cum laude from Smith College in 1962. Supported by a Fulbright Fellowship, she spent the following year at St. Hugh's College, Oxford University. She received her M.A. in 1966 from Yale University, and her Ph.D. from Yale in 1969. In 1968, she joined the Department of English at Berkeley, becoming an associate professor in 1972, professor in 1981, and department chair from 1999 to 2002.

During her tenure as a member of the English department, she was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship (1982-83), the Distinguished Teaching Award (1986), and a Faculty Award for Outstanding Mentorship of Graduate Student Instructors (2006). In 1990, she was chosen to deliver the annual Charles Mills Gayley Lecture, the highest honor bestowed by the Department of English. In recognition of her outstanding scholarly and institutional contributions, she was awarded the Berkeley Citation, the campus's highest honor for service to the University, upon her retirement in 2007.

Janet's first book, *The Common Liar: An Essay on Antony and Cleopatra* (Yale, 1973), which received honorable mention for the Explicator Prize, wove together an intensive reading of dramatic language with an analysis of the play's cultural contexts and sources. A critic in the *Shakespeare Quarterly* described it as "the most useful and responsible study of the play" ever written.

During a year, 1976-77, at the Hampstead and Tavistock Clinics in London, supported by a fellowship from the American Council of Learned Societies, Janet began the systematic study of psychoanalysis that was to transform her scholarship and, as a consequence, Shakespeare studies generally. In path breaking essays on *Coriolanus*, *Measure for Measure*, *Troilus and Cressida*, *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, and *King Lear*, she developed a psychoanalytically informed reading of the infantile fantasies that underlie Shakespeare's densely metaphoric language and unexpected turns of plot. These essays culminated in the magisterial *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare's Plays, Hamlet to The Tempest* (1992), which established Janet as the foremost feminist psychoanalytic critic of Shakespeare. By tracing the evolution of fantasies of contamination at the site of origin, *Suffocating Mothers* brilliantly uncovers the "subterranean logic" that drives Shakespearean tragedy and romance. Penetrating to the core of ontological anxiety, she explores how acknowledging that one is "of woman born" threatens the foundation of masculine identity. The terror and

rage unleashed by this threat reverberate across Shakespeare's poetry and generate the retaliatory fantasies that are audible in the dual meaning of "suffocating mothers."

Suffocating Mothers opened a mode of inquiry that extended far beyond Shakespeare studies. By pushing with a kind of laser vision toward the most nuanced reaches of language in a fluid and expressive prose that makes virtually no use of specialized terminology, Janet made the deepest insights and practices of psychoanalysis available to a wide range of critics in every literary period and genre. Her refusal to waste a word or to say anything she didn't mean and her ability to hold together with a luminous clarity the big picture and the individual word resonated within the psychoanalytic community as well. She was an interdisciplinary member of the San Francisco Center for Psychoanalysis, cofounded the UC Berkeley object-relations and literature seminar, and participated actively in the University of California Interdisciplinary Psychoanalytic Consortium.

In the next phase of her career, and of her life, Janet turned her attention to questions of Jewish identity and the complicated and contradictory ways that Jews were imagined in Renaissance England. As she became increasingly involved with the Jewish Renewal Movement, especially with the Kehilla Community Synagogue, which became a central spiritual and social community for her, Janet pursued an inquiry into Shakespeare's representation of Christian- Jewish relations in *The Merchant of Venice*. The result, *Blood Relations: Christian and Jew in The Merchant of Venice* (2008), which one reviewer described as "the crowning achievement of an outstanding critical career," is a bold and original study of the specter of Jewish conversion in a play that exposes a broader cultural anxiety about a Jewish presence that can neither be embraced nor disavowed. The book inspired a production of *The Merchant of Venice* by the National Theater of Portugal in 2008 in Lisbon, where Janet spent a week lecturing on the play in tandem with the performances.

Janet was a devoted and passionate teacher who worked her pedagogic magic with equal effect in intimate seminars and huge lecture halls, where she was able to hold hundreds of students spellbound by speaking quietly, penetratingly and in the first person about literary milestones they had previously heard discussed only in reverent tones. Regardless of class size, students felt acknowledged as individuals who were called on to think through, argue with, and position themselves in relation to the interpretation Janet presented. In the statement she wrote about her teaching philosophy for the Distinguished Teaching Award, Janet cited the teaching evaluation she valued most: "You know, you've only taught me one thing this semester: that under every question there's another question and another one under that, and that you have to keep on asking them." No doubt this challenge is why the student guide to "Ten Things You Must Do before Graduating from Berkeley" lists taking a course with Janet as its sole academic imperative.

In addition to the courses on Shakespeare and other Renaissance authors that she taught at every level, Janet loved teaching the first installment of the survey course for undergraduate English majors and, until the program was disbanded, the course she helped to design for M.A. students. She was also widely known for her courses on psychoanalysis and literature and her seminar on Toni Morrison, one of the first to be taught in the nation.

Teaching was not confined to the classroom for Janet. During her legendary office hours, she directed her full attention to every student, current or former, for countless hours. She kept a couch outside her office to encourage waiting students to sit down and forge their own community, and she kept glass jars of treats inside her office to fortify them as the afternoon waned. She made time and space for every aspect of student experience to be thoroughly and honestly discussed. She also worked intensively and rigorously with graduate student instructors to help them hone their own pedagogic skills and styles, and they showed their appreciation by nominating her for the Award for Outstanding Mentorship of Graduate Student Instructors.

Janet loved the theater and participated actively in the Center for Theater Arts, on whose advisory board she served on from 1996 to 1997. After her appointment to a University committee to re-examine and upgrade the theater, dance, and performance studies program, she worked hard to design a suitable Ph.D. program. She served on both the graduate admissions and faculty appointments committees of what became the Department of Theater, Dance, and Performance Studies, and became the dissertation director for four Ph.D. students. She served the University in numerous other capacities, among them as a member of the Reading and Composition Task Force from 2006 to 2007, and a participant in the search for a dean of humanities in 2005.

Another of Janet's other passions was Italy. She spent the summers of 1972 and 1973 in Perugia studying Italian language and literature. She received a Rockefeller Foundation fellowship to the Bellagio Study Center

in 1998, and a Bogliasco Foundation fellowship to the Liguria Study Center in 2003. For a number of years, she and her husband Robert Osserman spent several months annually in an apartment they rented in Rome. She became quite fluent in Italian, watched Italian movies, and loved shopping at their local outdoor market.

Wherever she was, Janet was a community builder. She greeted each new member of the department with an acute interest in that individual's deepest academic passions and potential. She drew colleagues to her home for dinners and brunches and held regular meetings of her dissertation group at her home. As department chair, she worked tirelessly to create a diverse, inclusive, and democratic community. Her commitment to this community and to the principle of academic freedom triumphed over the challenge posed by external opposition to a reading and composition course on the poetics and politics of Palestinian literature.

At the heart of Janet's communities was her family. She was married for 33 years to Robert Osserman, professor emeritus of mathematics at Stanford University, and special projects director at the Mathematical Sciences Research Institute. They were both enormously proud of their two sons, Brian Osserman and Stephen Osserman, and deeply happy to have been able to welcome their wives, Fu Liu and Sarah Loose, into their family. Knowing that Brian and Stephen had found the two best imaginable partners made it possible for Janet to die at peace. Her profound gratitude to her family is best expressed in her acknowledgment in *Blood Relations* to her children, "continual sources of wonder and delight," and to her husband "who provides a foundation and a safe haven for my life in all ways."

That safe haven is what Janet also gave us all.

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Elizabeth
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