

**In Memoriam
Marjorie Curry Woods
1947-2025**

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It is with great sadness that we announce the passing of Marjorie Curry Woods, the Sue Goldston Lebermann Endowed Professor in Liberal Arts (Emerita) and Distinguished Teaching Professor Emerita. A specialist in Medieval Studies, a brilliant linguist, paleographer, and theorist of rhetoric, and a phenomenal teacher, Dr. Woods joined the Department of English at the University of Texas in 1991. Shortly thereafter she became a faculty affiliate of the Program in Comparative Literature, where she served as an influential member for nearly three decades. Dr. Woods was a bright star at the University of Texas, and a mentor and role model for generations of students and colleagues. It is hard to imagine the world without her in it. Dr. Woods passed away on August 9th at her home in Kona-Kailua, Hawaii, where she had moved after her retirement from UT. Living in Hawaii was always a dream of hers, which she was able to achieve for the past three years.

Dr. Woods grew up in a military family. Her father, Mark William Woods, was an admiral in the U.S. Navy, and the family moved from base to base nearly every year. She liked to explain that her

experience of changing schools as often as she did and growing up as the oldest in a family of 6 children gave rise to her abiding interest in teaching. Dr. Woods also experienced an extended period of illness during her early years; reading became her refuge, and for the rest of her life, Dr. Woods was a voracious reader who enjoyed all types of literature.

In 1969 Dr. Woods graduated with her B.A. in English with Honors from Stanford University. She received her M.A. and Ph.D. in Mediaeval Studies from the University of Toronto in 1970 and 1977 respectively. Woods taught at Oberlin College and at the University of Rochester before her arrival at the University of Texas in 1991.

Dr. Woods's special area of research was the pedagogy of the medieval European writing classroom, where lessons were conducted in Latin. One rhetoric textbook dominated these classrooms for several centuries. This was the *Poetria nova* of Geoffrey of Vinsauf, composed circa 1210 C.E., a long poem that aimed to teach students how to write poetry and elegant prose. Dr. Woods visited many countries in Europe and around the world to locate every surviving medieval and renaissance commentary on the *Poetria nova*. This was a huge task that took many years of searching. The outcome of her work was *An Early Commentary on the Poetria nova of Geoffrey of Vinsauf* (NY: Garland, 1985) and her monumental study *Classroom Commentaries: Teaching the Poetria nova across Medieval and Renaissance Europe* (Ohio State University Press, 2010). While this might seem like an ultra-specialized and niche topic of research, Dr. Woods had an extraordinary gift for bringing her research to life and showing how its concerns are relevant to scholars and students who are not medievalists themselves. *Classroom Commentaries* won the Rhetoric Society of America's prize for the most outstanding book in any field of rhetorical studies published in 2010. She taught her undergraduate students the modern applications of medieval rhetorical study pedagogy by getting them to use the tropes and schemes of Geoffrey's *Poetria nova* in their own classroom essays.

Proof of her excellence as a teacher is not hard to find. Dr. Woods won some of the most distinguished teaching awards offered by the University of Texas. These included the Texas Blazers Faculty Excellence Award (2013, 2006, 2003, and 2000); U.T.'s Academy of Distinguished Teachers (2011-); the Phi Beta Kappa, Alpha of Texas Award for Distinction in Teaching (2011); the Chad Oliver Teaching Award for the Plan II Honors Program (2007); the Harry H. Ransom Teaching Award (2006); and the President's Associates' Teaching Award (2004). She was also the College of Liberal Arts Nominee for Regents Outstanding Teacher Award (2018 and 2019). Dr. Woods was a superstar professor at the University of Texas.

Equally important but harder to quantify was the teaching Woods did outside the classroom: both the doctoral students she trained and the young scholars whose careers she deeply impacted. Many budding medievalists owe the publication of their first articles to her generous mentoring, whether she was reviewing their submissions to journals, volunteering to comment on drafts, or taking time to discuss their ideas at professional conferences. Her countless acts of kindness are what her students and colleagues remember and cherish most.

Dr. Woods's final book, *Weeping for Dido: The Classics in the Medieval Classroom* (Princeton UP, 2019), was a collection of essays based on presentations delivered in 2014 as the E. H. Gombrich Lecture Series at the Warburg Institute in London. Woods noticed a recurring pattern in medieval boys' education: they were often asked to memorize poetic or dramatic monologues by adult women such as Hecuba or Dido in extreme distress. Why, she wondered, were boys taught for centuries to recite

and memorize the words of women in pain? Were they being asked to identify with characters across gender, age, and historical lines? Perhaps, she concluded, but not simply or primarily for that reason, and not necessarily to cultivate empathy. Rather, she argued, memorizing these emotional passages was a pedagogical tool for teaching language and literature. Strong emotions served as the ultimate mnemonic device. Dr. Woods made an important contribution to cognitive literary and cultural studies with this discovery, once again proving that the medieval classroom has unexpected lessons for people living today.

Woods garnered some of the most important awards and distinctions that a humanities scholar can earn. These included the Rome Prize in Renaissance and Early Modern Studies from the American Academy in Rome, where she spent 2007-2008 working on *Weeping for Dido*. Woods was also invited to join the ultra-prestigious Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton during 2011-2012. During 2014-15 she presented the results of this research in London and conducted further manuscript research at the American Academy in Berlin; All Souls College, Oxford; and the Herzog August Bibliothek in Wolfenbüttel. These are some highlights of a career that included numerous other awards and distinctions.

Dr. Woods retired in the spring of 2020, shortly after the Covid pandemic exploded around the globe. She relocated to Hawaii, a place where she had spent happy years during her adolescence. She loved her new setting, and she devoted herself to serious study of the Hawaiian language. She also enjoyed daily ocean swimming and the best that island life had to offer her.

Marjorie (Jorie) Woods was an original: a passionate, joyful, brilliant, and inspiring woman who lived her life to the fullest and brought magic to the people around her. She had an incredible sense of style, which was one of her forms of self-expression. Those of us who knew her are grateful for that opportunity. Dr. César Salgado, CGS for U.T. Comparative Literature, described Dr. Woods as “an incredible colleague, a force of nature.”

In her memory, we present the following poem by W.S. Merwin, "Nocturne II." Merwin, like Dr. Woods, lived in Hawaii, where he created a nature conservancy (<https://merwinconservancy.org/about/>).

August arrives in the dark
we are not even asleep and it is here
with a gust of rain rustling before it
how can it be so late all at once
somewhere the Perseids are falling
toward us already at a speed that would
burn us alive if we could believe it
but in the stillness after the rain ends
nothing is to be heard but the drops falling
one at a time from the tips of the leaves
into the night and I lie in the dark
listening to what I remember
while the night flies on with us into itself

From *The Shadow of Sirius* (Copper Canyon Press, 2008)

