

Phyllis Goodhart Gordan—A Memoir

My memories of Phyllis Walter Goodhart Gordan have to do with the continuity and community which Renaissance scholarship represents. We met first in the classroom of a secondary school in New York City where, after my years of graduate school at Harvard, I was teaching history to her oldest daughter, and our second meeting was at dinner in her home on 78th Street. There I was introduced to the rest of her family and her extraordinary library, and later that same evening she took me up to Columbia University's Casa Italiana and introduced me to the Renaissance Seminar where were gathered some of the scholars who, along with Phyllis, were responsible for the founding and shaping of the Renaissance Society of America. Those people, those books, that company, formed much of the structure of Phyllis's life and commitments.

She was a scholar with an immensely personal interest in the tradition of Renaissance learning. Her own education had been fostered by her father, Howard Lehman Goodhart, who had sent her to the finest schools for young women, the Brearley School in New York (where I met her), Bryn Mawr College, and later Radcliffe College for graduate work. Phyllis was a classics major whose interest in the Renaissance recovery of ancient texts led her father to start acquiring, for her use, the early editions of these published texts. The library grew to legendary size. Phyllis and her husband, John Dozier Gordan, curator of the Berg Collection at the New York Public Library, continued to nurture it during their lifetimes.

There was more to that library than just its astounding richness. It was there to serve. Phyllis offered it to her friends for their use. She did so to me, and when I inquired whether she might have the 1502 edition of Francesco Filelfo's letters which I was having trouble locating, she looked and found she had five other early editions of Filelfo's letters, but not the one I sought. A few weeks later she called me and said, "Now I have acquired that 1502 edition. When would you like to come and use it?"

Scholarship, for Phyllis, was a continuum. As her father had purchased books so she could pursue her studies, she delighted in

making her texts available to others, or securing them for such a purpose. These gestures were part of the community she felt that scholarship represented, an extension of that friendship of the mind in which she so believed. She knew about such friendships; she wrote about them in her book, *Two Renaissance Book Hunters: the Letters of Poggius Bracciolini to Nicolaus de Niccolis* (Columbia University Press, 1974). She knew about them also from her experience with the many people who had helped her in her quest for the Poggio-Niccoli correspondence, whom she acknowledged in the preface to that book, people who had shared their libraries and expertise with Phyllis—as she did with others.

There is a quatrain which Phyllis quotes in a talk she gave at the Bodleian in 1973 which was later printed as a pamphlet, “To Hold the Renaissance in Our Hands.” The quatrain comes from one of her father’s favorite works, a French edition and translation of Cicero’s *De Officiis* published in Paris around 1500 and which he had acquired for the library. It had delightful woodcuts, she said, but “its real charm lies in the ballade at the end with the refrain, *Pour bien vivre selon vertu morale.*”

Phyllis Gordan did more than hold the Renaissance in her hands. She lived the Renaissance *ethos*, understanding that *humanitas*, the humanism of the Renaissance, was of two sorts: it was kindness and courtesy, as well as honoring the great heritage of antiquity and practicing its moral strength. It was respecting and then recreating, through one’s own life, the great spirits of the past.

So she was generous to individuals and institutions, supporting those she had attended and then a quantity of enterprises dedicated to the training and preserving of scholars, scholarly works, and the entire educational enterprise. A partial list would include the Brearley School, Bryn Mawr College, New York Public Library, Renaissance Society of America, American Philological Association, Medieval Academy, American Academy in Rome, New York Society Library, Union Settlement in New York City, Carnegie Corporation, Grolier Club, and Yale Library Associates.

For many of these she not only made material gifts but served as trustee, director, exhibit arranger, and wise counselor. Unfailing in her interest and attendance at meetings and symposia, she served the cause of Renaissance studies in numerous ways, setting herself a tall program and, quietly and modestly, casting a tall spell. We,

who have been graced by Phyllis's *humanitas*, must continue it on. Remembering her, our *envoi* to this fine scholar and friend might well be taken from the *envoi* of her French edition of Cicero's *De Officiis*:

“Prince des cieux si ta b nignit 
Nous a receus en amour filiale
Donne nous temps et opportunit 
De bien vivre selon vertu morale.”

Patricia Labalme