

Margaret Schlauch: The Icon and the Scholar

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.12775/LC.2017.023>

In the late 1980s Margaret Schlauch unquestionably “reigned” in the Departments of English throughout Poland. Her name was frequently evoked during lectures as well as classes. She haunted my pre-exam dreams, as I wondered whether I had grasped enough of her book on medieval English literature to pass the test. That fated book, entitled *English Medieval Literature and Its Social Foundations* (1956), opened an entirely new world of literary texts hitherto unknown to us but became a nemesis for those students whose interests lay distant from Old and Middle English Literature. Little did we know that the name “Margaret Schlauch” would not leave us during the course of our studies, as her work on *The English Language in Modern Times* (since 1400) (1959)¹ will re-appear on the course list for the subject of the History of English. Both for the first as well for the third year students of English, her figure was almost mythical, but none of us could have conceived that there was a person behind the dreaded name on the covers of our textbooks.

Many years later, already as a professor of medieval literature, I met Sheila Delaney at the 1997 or 1998 Medieval Congress in Leeds and I learnt that Margaret Schlauch was a well known medievalist whose scholarly publications reached far beyond Poland, where she lived and worked from 1950 until her death. It was also during that momentous meeting with Sheila Delaney that the germ of the future MESS (Medieval English Studies Symposium) conference was conceived. But it was in 1999 in Vancouver, during the IAUPE conference, that Sheila Delaney and Jacek Fisiak decided to organize a conference to commemorate the scholar Margaret Schlauch.² And indeed, in 2002, an eminent

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¹ M. Schlauch, *The English Language in Modern Times* (since 1400), Warsaw: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1965 [1959].

² My own contribution was a paper entitled “Internal Exile: Dorothea of Montau’s Inward Journey” (*Studia Anglica Posnaniensia* 38 (2002), pp. 433–444).

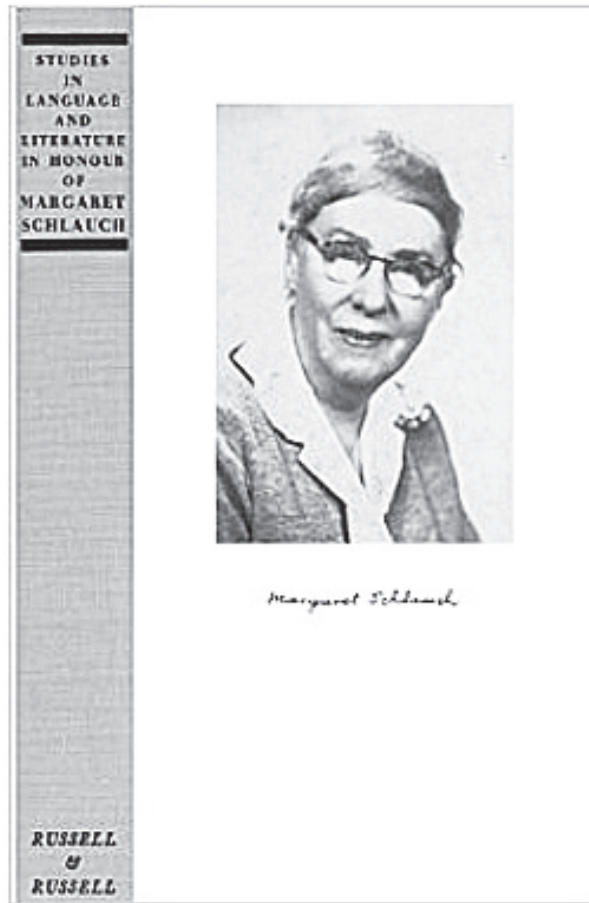
group of medievalists convened in Poznań to discuss various aspects of medieval studies and honor the life and work of Margaret Schlauch. Her publications, which covered a wide area of interests both literary and linguistic, epitomized the spirit of the conference for years to come. And so Margaret Schlauch has continued to “be present” now in the Faculty of English of Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, even though perhaps other manuals haunt first year students’ pre-exam dreams.

Professor Margaret Schlauch was born in Philadelphia on September 25, 1898, and died on July 19, 1986, in Warsaw. Her father, who was born in Germany, was a professor of mathematics. She received her B.A. degree from Barnard College in 1918. In 1923–1924 she obtained a fellowship from the American Association of University Women to attend the University of Munich. She earned both her M.A. (1919) as well as her Ph.D. (1927) degrees at Columbia University and in 1924 began lecturing at New York University. During her graduate studies she taught English at Theodore Roosevelt High School in New York. She became an assistant professor in 1927, associate professor in 1931, and full professor in 1940, the first woman to be appointed a full professor at that university. Apart from her year in Munich, she spent a summer as a visiting faculty member in German at the University of Chicago and in English at Johns Hopkins. Having migrated to Poland, she did not lose touch with America, and was a visiting professor at Vassar College and the University of Connecticut.

She left the United States for political reasons in 1951. According to Jacek Fisiak, she was a victim of McCarthyism³ as she was an active member of the Communist Party of America. Her sister Helen married a Polish physicist, Professor Leopold Infeld, a leftist, who was Einstein’s collaborator and had contacts with Los Alamos laboratory, the facility which during WWII coordinated the scientific research on nuclear weapons, known as the Manhattan Project. Infeld, who was a naturalized Canadian citizen, was suspected of espionage and so in 1950, the Infelds defected to the East, to Poland. In 1951 Margaret Schlauch received a subpoena from the House Un-American Activities Committee. Fearing accusations and an imminent loss of her position at the university, she decided to leave the United States and joined her sister in Poland. Later she became a Polish citizen. She spoke fluent Polish although with an American accent. Upon her departure from the United States, she wrote an explanatory letter to the chair of the English Department at New York University, and the university announced her resignation.

In Poland, she was appointed professor of English at the University of Warsaw in 1951. She was head of the Department of English from 1954 until her retirement in 1965. Between 1954 and 1956 she was also head of the Department of Linguistics. She remained at the University of Warsaw until her retirement in 1965. In 1959 she was instrumental in founding the Polish-Icelandic Cultural Society, of which she was the first president. In 1961 she became a corresponding member of the Polish Academy of Sciences. Throughout her life, Schlauch was a dedicated Marxist, applying Marxist principles to her literary and linguistic studies, and in fact soon after her arrival in Warsaw she joined the Polish Workers’ Party. Her adopted motherland appreciated her efforts and she was awarded Officer’s Cross of the Polish Order of Polonia Restituta (1958). In 1968 she received the Icelandic order of the Falcon and in 1985 Medal of the 40th Anniversary of the Polish People’s Republic.

³ J. Fisiak, “Margaret Schlauch (1898–1986)”, *Studia Anglica Posnaniensia* 38 (2002), p. 7.



Margaret Schlauch

She was liked by her colleagues and students, and although she never married, she was always surrounded by friends. She was a generous scholar always ready to help her students with their scholarly endeavor. She spent her summers researching in the British Library in London. During one such summer she met a young and ambitious student who was collecting materials for his M.A. thesis on Old English word formation in an Old English poem entitled “Phoenix.” She had already known the student as they had met in Warsaw during her seminars. The student was Jacek Fisiak.

“Having obtained necessary permits,” Jacek Fisiak says,

I went to the British Museum and began my research. One day I was sitting at a desk, and out of the blue somebody tapped me on the shoulder asking what I was doing there. It was Margaret Schlauch. She then invited me to lunch with her colleagues. We met at the agreed hour, and I was introduced to none other than Albert C. Baugh. Professor Schlauch introduced me as the rising star of the Department of English in Warsaw, and we had a very pleasant chat about medieval studies. Later on, she was also instrumental in my choice of the field of research as she suggested that there was already one Anglo-Saxonist at the University of Warsaw, Prof. Alfred Reszkiewicz (1920–1973), who was a specialist in early Modern English, and what was

needed was a specialist in Middle English. And this is how I started researching Chaucer's language. I will always remember her as a person who was modest and friendly, who took interest in her students' and colleagues' academic work.⁴

Her scholarly interests focused on Chaucer, Anglo-Saxon and Old Norse literature. Margaret Schlauch was quite a prolific writer. She published fifteen books around one hundred articles and forty reviews. Some of her books were reprinted many times in Poland. She was editor or member of the editorial boards of *Speculum* (1933–1936), *Science and Society* (1936) and *Kwartalnik Neofilologiczny* (1954–1975). The already mentioned work on *English Medieval Literature and Its Social Foundations* was one of the few works which showed the confluence of literary and social context of medieval English literature. The work which I could not appreciate as a student became one of the textbooks I returned to in my further scholarly research. Even though I agree with Sheila Delaney that the way Schlauch explained troubadour poetry “with a rather heavy-handed and unilluminating quotation about adultery from Engels's *Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State*”⁵ could be rather demeaning, the overall scheme and thoroughness of the analysis evades the passing of time and changing critical approaches. While I would not agree with her dismissive attitude towards the mystics, I understand that she came out of a different school of thought and the mystics were re-discovered by later feminist medievalists. Schlauch's book contains only a short sub-chapter on the reformers and mystics.⁶ In it she devotes a considerable amount of space to John Wycliff, and thereafter a page is devoted to the three mystics, Rolle, Hilton and Julian of Norwich. Julian's *Revelations of Divine Love* is characterized as an “emotional outpouring.”⁷ She judges Julian's writing as sincere but simplistic:

her [Julian's] visions and meditations on sin and redemption are expressed in an artless language, often confused, but also at times gruesomely concrete. With her *Revelations*, mystical writing becomes what we should today call hysterical. Her brooding on the physical anguish connected with redemption reminds us of the art of certain early Flemish painters who concentrated on details of blood and suffering against grotesque backgrounds of dreamlike horror.⁸

One may wonder what she would have said about *The Book of Margery Kempe*, which is, as we all know, too steeped in “brooding and gruesome concreteness” to be included in a history of medieval literature. Yet, when Schlauch discusses the artistic vision of *Piers Plowman*, she comments on the techniques of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century paintings, “in which scenes of tactile realism surround the personages representing abstract ideas—the divine and saintly ones—which provides a commentary on them, often by way of contrasts. In Poland, the work of Wit Stwoszcz illustrates this method of juxtaposition.”⁹

Likewise, her Ph.D. dissertation discussing Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale* and its literary antecedents and analogues is one of the most thorough studies on the subject. *Chaucer's*

⁴ J. Fisiak in private conversation.

⁵ S. Delany, “Medievalist Marxists: A Tradition”, *Studia Anglica Posnaniensia* 38 (2002), p. 15.

⁶ M. Schlauch, *English Medieval Literature and Its Social Foundations*, Warsaw: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1956, pp. 208–213.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 212.

⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 212–213.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 217.

Constance and Accused Queens (1927) is a work that anyone who researches oriental romances must come across, especially while working on the romance of *Octavian*. Schlauch was aware of the current research perspectives but quite boldly decides:

The heroines of medieval fiction are not extremely varied in character: the amusing, unadmirable matrons of the *fabliaux*; the well-bred, introspective court ladies of Chrétien de Troyes, the strong-minded Saracen princesses who abjure fatherland and religion to marry Christian knights; the young maidens who are rescued from imminent danger abroad or awarded as prizes in tournaments at home. Among other equally popular types is the widely celebrated, attractive figure of an innocent, persecuted queen, whose character and story arouse pity rather than mirth or excitement. Heroines of this type appear in narratives which center on the steadfastness of sorely tried virtue.¹⁰

Schlauch painstakingly recreates the origins of such motifs, examining the changes—for example the shift from matriarchal to patriarchal societies,¹¹ and the ensuing conflicts between the old and the new ideologies.¹² She notices that in the romances the vilified queens are usually wives or mothers of heroes, most of whom are “accused by villains and condemned by a husband to death or exile, and rescued by a son or champion, all of which indicates the literary popularity of these situations.”¹³ Yet she suggests a differentiation between the origins of such motifs as animal or monster birth, claiming that the indictment that Chaucer’s Constance should give birth to a monster makes the tale more akin to folk-tales than to high culture romance. Drawing attention to folk-tales, she claims that “child murder and giving birth to animals are two of the most important denunciations occurring in the folk-tales,”¹⁴ whereas the bearing of animals is “even more primitive than the accusation of infidelity.”¹⁵ While analyzing literary parallels, Schlauch looks at the analogies of tales in other cultures claiming, for example, that

[a] common denominator exists between Chaucer and an African folk-tale, perhaps: the heritage of a similar past of half-forgotten customs, superstitions and beliefs, which display a remarkable similarity the world over. If one is careful to employ comparison only for the purpose of obtaining a concept of this wider psychological background, shared in its general features by all primitive peoples, one may draw significant inferences from the illustrative use of Märchen. And, in the survivals of primitive custom and psychology, European folk-tales are quite as rich as any others.¹⁶

Bringing to light the fate of the female characters makes Schlauch undoubtedly one of the first feminist medievalists, interested not only in medieval literature *per se* but also in its wider social and cultural context. *Antecedents of the English Novel, 1400–1600: From Chaucer to Deloney*, published in 1963, continues her research of the Early Modern period

¹⁰ M. Schlauch, *Chaucer's Constance and Accused Queens*, New York: The New York City Press, 1973, p. 3.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 41.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 45.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 3.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 11.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 61.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 8.

and the contribution of romances to the birth of the novel.¹⁷ The work is one of the earliest sources to shed light on the still debatable subject of the (di)fusion of the romance and the novel and like all her other publications evades the thing her favorite author Geoffrey Chaucer dreaded most, mutability.

Tempora mutantur, nos et mutamur in illis, yet Margaret Schlauch's scholarly output has remained a constant presence in medieval research. She left a mark in Poland and in academia around the world. For a generation of students who knew her as a professor of English, she is remembered as "an erudite scholar, and outstanding teacher and a person of great integrity. She remained faithful to her youthful ideals of social justice until her last days."¹⁸ For the generations of students and scholars who never had the pleasure of meeting her in person, she has remained a symbol of academic achievement.

¹⁷ M. Schlauch, *Antecedents of the English Novel 1400–1600*, Warsaw and Oxford: Polish Scientific Publishers (PWN) and Oxford University Press, 1965 [1963].

¹⁸ J. Fisiak, op. cit., p. 9.