

Assessing and Continuing the Contributions of Grace Harriet Macurdy, Pioneering
Feminist Scholar: Barbara McManus' *The Drunken Duchess of Vassar: Grace Harriet
Macurdy, Pioneering Feminist Classical Scholar*

Barbara F. McManus' *The Drunken Duchess of Vassar: Grace Harriet Macurdy, Pioneering Feminist Scholar*, published posthumously by the Ohio State University Press in 2017, does not purport to offer new research on the lives and achievements of the queens within the dynasties from Philip II of Macedon to Cleopatra VII of Egypt (359-30 BCE), nor of the pro-Roman female monarchs who ruled semi-autonomous client kingdoms controlled by the Roman empire. Rather, as its title indicates, *The Drunken Duchess* investigates and illuminates the life and achievements of Macurdy herself. Yet in contextualizing Macurdy's *Hellenistic Queens: A Study of Woman-Power in Macedonia, Seleucid Syria and Ptolemaic Egypt*, published in 1932 by Johns Hopkins University Press, and her *Vassal Queens and Some Contemporary Women in the Roman Empire*, published by Hopkins in 1937, McManus offers important insights about what made Macurdy's work on these topics both significant for its time and of major intellectual consequence today. What is more, McManus' own feminist scholarship, both in and beyond her groundbreaking Macurdy biography, also embodies and continues what Macurdy and her work memorably represented.

My paper will primarily focus on McManus' own assessment of Macurdy's books on both Hellenistic and Roman vassal queens in Chapter 10 of her Macurdy biography, entitled "Redefining the Classical Scholar as a Woman." I will initially consider how and why Macurdy's research in these areas of Hellenistic and Roman history, the first efforts by a classical scholar to recover and document the lives of individual women whose

names are part of the ancient Greco-Roman historical record, represented a dramatic change from her earlier scholarly foci. After receiving her PhD from Columbia in 1903, with a dissertation on the dating of Euripides' plays, Macurdy published widely on Greek literature, and on prehistoric influences on Greek civilization and culture, but not in the field of ancient history nor on women in the classical world. McManus attributes Macurdy's new research interests to her deep involvement in the women's suffrage movement; strong belief that education had the capacity to empower women; unhappy experiences on the male-dominated Managing Committee of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens; growing compulsion to speak out publicly against biased and discriminatory assertions about women, both in her own day and in Greco-Roman times; and her desire to win distinction as a philologically-trained and gifted classical scholar who spoke with authority as a woman.

I will, moreover, foreground what McManus regards as distinctive about Macurdy's approach to her topic. Among them are Macurdy's determination to judge these historical women as individuals in the specific context of their culture and time period (rather than as examples of a singular, unchanging species); her insistence that ancient kings and queens be evaluated by the same norms; her recognition that these royal women, unlike men, never attained the throne purely by birthright; her reliance on the material evidence of coins, inscriptions, papyri, sculpture and vases to supplement literary texts; and her blending of an enthusiastic, often personal voice with a traditionally detached authorial tone when condemning feminine stereotypes that interfere with a judicious interpretation of the facts. As McManus observes, too, in demonstrating that Hellenistic queens rarely achieved independent power equal to that of kings, Macurdy

highlights individual qualities and strengths of character that enabled some of them to wrest both influence and actual authority from an overwhelmingly patriarchal dynastic system. And McManus concludes, “by studying Hellenistic monarchies from the perspective of the queens, the subjects of her investigation, by focusing on women as agents and men in relation to them, Macurdy turned historical scholarship on its head”.

Yet the title of McManus’ chapter on Macurdy’s feminist research about ancient Greek and Roman women rulers, claiming that it “redefined the female classical scholar as a woman”, reminds us that both Macurdy and McManus helped transform how women have participated, and been perceived, in the realm of classical scholarship. I will thus reflect on some key similarities between these two transformational researchers and professional citizens, both of whom taught at all-female undergraduate colleges rather than at PhD granting research institutions.