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## Journal Articles

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## JOSEPHINE MILES

Robert Brentano

WHEN I WAS CHOSEN to give one of the 1988 Faculty Research Lectures my selectors could not, I think, have known why the selection gave me such pleasure. It was because one of my predecessors had been Josephine Miles, and I would stand in her spot. I decided to talk, mostly in images, I believe, about some of my ideas about the medieval and modern writing of history, to weave them around a specific text, the *autobiografia* of a late thirteenth-century hermit pope. With my title, “Peter of Morrone’s Autobiography as ‘a boy in a red sweater,’” I dedicated the talk to the memory of Josephine Miles. The boy comes from her poem “History” which she had sent to me, and I hoped that his red sweater and bicycle tricks might, perhaps incidentally, be seen as tying together my perilously centripetal talk. The poem begins:



Josephine Miles in 1956. *University Archives.*

As I sit on the front  
porch reading a book on the Hittites  
With its puzzle over the relation of hieroglyph to cuneiform  
In Anatolia, a boy in a red sweater  
Rides by on his bike, trying stunts  
Like bucking bronco, and side winder.  
Impractical as they are in the stiff breeze of the bay,  
They bring to light  
The practicalities of cuneiform.

I liked and like Jo’s poetry a lot; its spare geometric intellectuality is much to my and my generation’s taste. But her poetry is not the most specific reason for my dedication. I thank the editors of the *Chronicle* for letting me, in telling that reason, celebrate Jo Miles.

When I came to Berkeley to teach in 1952 I had never met any of my colleagues in the history department. I had been hired by cable. In my first departmental meeting I sensed something strange, an unidentified peculiarity. Then I realized that there were no women in the room. I had come from Swarthmore and Oxford where, particularly in medieval history, women—Berkshire women, Bryn Mawr women, St. Hilda’s women—were obvious,

dominant, assumed. Almost all of my most powerful teachers had been women, and here there were none. I learned explanations: a distinguished single woman would not come to our Western isolation; a married woman could not leave or bring her husband. But there sitting with her poetry in the middle of the English department was Josephine Miles.

My specific reason for honoring and being grateful to Jo, in fact, has to do with her sitting in the middle of male members of the English department—a category of whom she herself has spoken well and gratefully in an oral history. As a young teacher of English history I was a convenient adjunct to her department's notorious doctor's orals. They were often unattractive to people who liked literature. In the worst I can remember, I felt that I had entered Hell's Mouth. Three, at least at that moment, atrociously dull examiners asked what seemed to me anti-literary questions and flaunted their lack of interest in the candidate by reading stacks of books that they had brought to the exam, and by stopping reading only when they themselves asked questions. Academia did not seem just unexciting; it seemed really bad. Then Jo, who had watched the candidate with attentive sympathy throughout, began her questions, and the water lily bloomed. The room came alive with thought and humanity and carefully chosen words. The three men did not exist. The exam was a success. Josephine Miles had done that. I was shown what was possible.

### **Josephine Miles (1911-1985)**

Josephine Miles earned her master's degree in 1934, and doctorate in 1938 from Berkeley. She loved teaching; in a letter to the chair of the Department of English dated July 5, 1940, just following her appointment as assistant professor, she wrote: "It seems to me I never could have believed that a great university could be so flexible and so tolerant and so personally kind as to give me for this year a chance I thought perhaps never to have." It is not clear whether the flexibility she mentions in offering her the job refers to either or both of her "handicaps": the fact that she was a woman or her crippling rheumatoid arthritis. She was the first woman to become a tenured member of the Berkeley English Department in 1947, and the first woman to be honored with the title of University Professor in 1973. At Berkeley she was named Faculty Research Lecturer for 1975-76. Seldom has anyone combined such distinction in creative writing, teaching, and scholarship. An internationally respected poet and scholar, she was also a legendary teacher whose former students frequently turned to her for criticism of their work, advice about their courses, or just the reassuring sense that she was there. Miles excelled as a teacher and was awarded the Distinguished Teaching Award in 1977. In 1983 Josephine Miles published her *Collected Poems*, gleaned from verse published over a period of more than half a century. She was also the author of *Eras and Modes in English Poetry*, a trailblazing study of poetic diction. She was honored at various times by a Guggenheim Fellowship, by fellowships from the American Association of University Women, the Armenian Council of Learned Societies, the National Endowment for the Arts, and by the highest award of the Association of American Poets. Characteristically, Josephine Miles willed her house to the university to be used as a meeting place for writers, and she left her poetry library to be used as the nucleus of the Poetry Alcove in the Morrison Room of the university library. By thousands of her former students, as well as by her former colleagues, she is remembered with affection and gratitude.