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## Leeds Barroll as Colleague and Teacher

RAPHAEL FALCO

MY landlady in Baltimore is a UMBC graduate in English. A returning student, she finished her degree a few years before I arrived at the university in 1993. Recently we were discussing her experiences at UMBC and ended up talking about the faculty. She was not bashful and quickly skewered several professors while praising others. Then she paused and changed her tone. "There was one fellow," she said quietly, "who commuted down each week from New York. He taught Shakespeare, but he seemed to know everything about everything." I knew instantly whom she meant. "Dr. Barroll," she murmured with satisfaction, as I tried to work out which of Leeds's many incarnations would have found him living in New York. "He was the best professor in the department. Taking his classes was a different experience altogether."

My landlady's conversation caught me off guard. Of course, I shouldn't have been surprised that Leeds had made such a strong impression on a student. He was after all a professor of English for more than forty years. Yet my own experience of him as a colleague seems to have crowded out the picture of him in the classroom, even though I remembered, with the prompting of my landlady's remarks, that Leeds had often offered a World Literature course because he thought our students needed the background—and even though, on thinking back, I remembered that he always had an eye out for the superior students. Still, to realize, after the fact of our dual participation in the daily life of the department, that Leeds so influenced his students (behind my back, as it were) was almost like discovering the guilty secret of a respectable maiden aunt.

I met Leeds under the worst possible conditions, engineered by our professional organization: a job interview in a cramped hotel room in New York. The room was cramped in part because the department couldn't afford a suite, and in part because stray faculty members had decided to sit in on the interview—"sit in" being a euphemism for "sprawl along the bed." Leeds had his own chair. I already knew the name J. Leeds Barroll but dutifully reviewed his books in preparation for the interview, although I didn't have the combination of shamelessness and rhetorical technique that it takes to

praise an interviewer's work during the interview. And, in any case, Leeds was too canny an interviewer to allow the conversation to drift toward his own work. In fact, he drove me in that conversation deeper and deeper into an unadorned explanation of my scholarly plans. I can still remember his resonant baritone in that overheated hotel room. "And what will your third book be?" he asked mischievously. *Third* book! I'd only just finished a first, basically my dissertation. Nevertheless I airily described my plans for a third book and Leeds nodded his head with interest. Only the slight twinkle in his eye indicated that he knew what I probably didn't suspect at the time—that that so-called third book had about as much chance as Stephano's conspiracy.

In later years I came to recognize that twinkle in Leeds's eye as the sign of an exceptional intelligence more often than not amused by what passed before it. Leeds never parades his brains; he doesn't have to be the smartest person in the room, although he usually is. He allows his canny and experience to blossom naturally. In ordinary conversation, in the course of committee work, in intensive strategizing sessions, Leeds would maintain the same even demeanor, leading always, but always from within. His leadership style was most evident in the way he thought the UMBC English department should function. Although he took his turn as chair (before my time), his abiding conviction was that, because we were a small department, the faculty members not involved in research should act as chairs, thus freeing the researchers to do their work. This system worked for quite some time, and thanks largely to Leeds's insistence on the primacy of research our department was able to attract a number of assistant professors with significant accomplishments. Similarly, still leading from within, Leeds guided the department chair in his negotiations with our provost and successfully brought the Shakespeare Association of America to UMBC.

This was the Leeds I knew in the English department—not the professor of students, but rather a guide and fellow traveler. Many an afternoon I'd wander down to his office at the end of the hall, clear a chair of books and mail (usually hopeful submissions for *Shakespeare Studies* or *MaRDiE*), and settle in for a talk. The content of our talks would vary, of course, but the form stayed more or less the same. It resembled the old inverted pyramid journalists liked to use. We began with all the facts in broad array at the top and worked our way down to a specific point of strategy. Often we were talking about a particular issue coming before the department at our next meeting and Leeds would tick off the votes, explaining almost clairvoyantly who would be for and who against, and why. I learned more about academic politics in those brief afternoon sessions than in ten years of department meetings, university committees, and dialogue with administrators. We didn't always win, Leeds and I, but we always knew why we lost. And perhaps that

was Leeds's best example to me in all departmental and university matters—to know why the other side is other.

But I don't wish to give the impression that we politicked for politicking's sake. To the contrary, we had a preeminently tangible goal. With Leeds's guidance, we were determined to transform the reputation of the UMBC English department both intramurally and in the profession at large. Leeds believed strongly that we should, and could, be known for our research. He not only set an example of this belief by his own publications and his daunting editorial responsibilities to two major journals, both of which he founded and both of which were housed at UMBC. He also exerted a steady pressure on the department to represent itself as research-driven, and, despite the lack of a graduate program, to hire only scholars with ambitious research plans. The success of Leeds's aims is evident now in our department, and not simply in the work of professors whom Leeds himself had a hand in hiring. More importantly, the generation of new professors hired by those of us who felt Leeds's unyielding pressure has exceeded our earliest goals. They include Lena Orlin, distinguished scholar and Executive Director of the Shakespeare Association of America; and Christoph Irmscher, an internationally renowned Americanist recently promoted directly from assistant to full professor, an unprecedented action at UMBC. As we continue to make new appointments, the new generation of scholars automatically seeks to hire candidates with a scholarly agenda and to fulfill the ideal of a research-driven department. They never look back, nor should they, and they little suspect how much their work is the fruit of a seed planted and watered through many a dry season by Leeds Barroll.

Leeds is gone from that office at the end of the hall now. His retirement a few years ago left a hole in my afternoons and a feeling of disorientation when I'd glance in his door and see the wrong person swiveling in his chair. But the disorientation didn't last long, and I soon filled the afternoons. And soon after that I realized why—the nickel dropped. Leeds had left me with all a mentor can leave—with all, in fact, Mentor gave Telemachus. I no longer needed him to understand my job, my responsibilities, my colleagues. The sense of politics he'd revealed has become part of my operating knowledge. The order of departmental values and professional ambitions remains a permanent part of my life—a mild yoke, as Milton says. All that's missing is the deep baritone reminding me to laugh.

There is a danger in a reminiscence like this one of presenting the subject as a figure of the past. Nothing could be further from the truth in Leeds's case. Earlier I called Leeds a friend and fellow traveler. The fellow traveler at UMBC might be gone, but the friend remains. Leeds, who paradoxically has become even more active in the profession since his retirement, meets me from time to time for lunch in Washington, DC. We talk on the telephone,

still strategizing a bit, and meet at conferences. He has become Scholar-in-Residence at the Folger Shakespeare Library, where he taught the masters research seminar for many years. Last year he published another book, on Queen Anne and the Stuart masque. And so on, and on. There is no evidence, in other words, that Leeds Barroll plans to drown his book any time soon.