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## Interview with Professor Rita Copeland

Interviewed by Nina Kaledin

### To begin, what is your position within the Classical Studies Department?

PROF. COPELAND — I am a professor in Classical Studies and I have a joint appointment in English.

### How long at Penn? And what did you do beforehand?

I've been at Penn since 1999, which is the longest period I've been at any university. Previously, I was at University of Texas in Austin, which is where I got tenure. After that, I was at the University of Minnesota, and then I came here. Basically I've been here more than half of my academic life. I really love Penn.

### What specifically do you like about Penn?

I really think Penn is the most congenial academic environment I've ever worked in. It is open, it is busy, and it is intellectually liberal. Interdisciplinarity is easy to do here for all kinds of reasons. In part because the administration encourages it—they make it possible to co-teach courses across departments, to cross list, to let students move between programs and departments, and there are many interdisciplinary units that function either as graduate programs or as simply research units and even working groups. The funding for that is good, and more importantly the administration does not say, "If you want to co-teach a course, which department is going to be paid?" Some universities do that, but Penn does not.

### For those who don't know you, could you elaborate on your area of study?

My area of research is the Middle Ages. But my Middle Ages, especially in terms of the work I've been doing very recently, extends from late antiquity all the way up to the



*Prof. Rita Copeland*

late middle ages. I spend as much time learning about the period of St. Augustine or the period of Macrobius, who is also 5th century, or the period of Boethius, which is what I'm teaching a graduate course on right now. Let's say from the 3rd c A.D. onwards, or the early Christian period onwards, is my focus of study. That period is so

much a transitional period looking backwards to antiquity but also setting the ground for the later Middle Ages. That period has become as much part of my medieval dossier as the standard Chaucer and Dante that you would think are appropriate to the Middle Ages. And I know we'll talk about this later, but a lot of this has been helped by the work I've done on the history of rhetoric. You can't study medieval rhetoric unless you really understand ancient rhetoric and unless you understand its key transformations in late antiquity.

### **Will you elaborate more on your work on rhetoric?**

I wrote my first book on translation in the Middle Ages. But that book was really about the theory of translation as it was first articulated by none other than Cicero. The first theory of translation in the European West comes from Cicero. Cicero gives us the language for it, and that served as the language that everybody else picked up. Horace repeated it, then a couple of other people in late antiquity recycled it. And they all recur to that same formula. "I do not translate word for word but I translate sense for sense." It is a real common place, but it means different things in different periods. For Cicero, it meant rhetoric. For others, it meant other kinds of frameworks, discourses, or fields of operation.

If it is not rhetoric it might be biblical interpretation or something else. That first book really set me on a course for thinking over the rest of my career about the history of rhetoric, the history of literary theory, and all the things that have to do with verbal production—reading, writing and speaking in one way or another. And one cannot study rhetoric in Chaucer unless you understand how the theory of rhetoric developed almost century by century from Greek antiquity all the way up through the Christian Middle Ages.

**Do you think there are clear breaks century to century in rhetoric?**

It is hard to break things down century by century when we do not have much evidence. So for the period from about 500 A.D.- 1100 A.D. we just do not have enough evidence to look at rhetoric in that manner. However, you can definitely break antiquity into different moments. There is the period of Aristotle and Demosthenes, and in Roman rhetoric the Republican period and the Imperial Period. And in late antiquity, there are shifts century to century. Second century rhetoric looks different from the rhetoric of the 4th and the 5th century A.D. After that, you tend to break it into larger units like early medieval, then the Carolingian period, that is, the period of Charlemagne, which is about 9th and 10th centuries, and then we talk about something that is called the high Middle Ages. And during the high Middle Ages, which is from about the 12th century onwards, you can start breaking things down again century by century because we have more information. It all depends on the number of texts that have survived or that we know about.

**Do you have a favorite rhetorician?**

I will tell you what I'm working on right now and this will lead you to my favorite rhetorician. I am working on a book called *Emotion and the History of Rhetoric in the Middle Ages*. I won't try to explain the whole book, but I begin by talking about what Cicero gave to the Western Middle Ages.

Cicero was the major rhetorician for the Western Middle Ages, which is the Latin-speaking European West. Then in the late 13th century, there is period of intense translation activity involving the works of Aristotle. They start translating Aristotle's Greek into Latin so that "everybody" can read, everybody meaning all the scholars. Most scholars in the Latin West could not read Greek, but if you could just get Aristotle translated into Latin, then the scholars could assimilate his ideas it.

Aristotle's *Rhetoric* was translated in 1269 A.D. And that, I think, is the turning point in European, rhetorical understanding. So if my book has a plot, the plot starts kind of slowly with the Ciceronian inheritance and I track that. The climax of the book, the moment of revelation, is the moment at which Aristotle steps back onto the scene. So do I have a favorite rhetorician? Yes, it is Aristotle. I think that Aristotle is the smartest man who ever lived. People may disagree with that claim, but Aristotle is really so smart. The whole of modern rhetorical studies is really indebted to Aristotle.

**In terms of your other works, you just edited *The Oxford History of Classical Reception in English Literature* that came out this year.**

Yes! The editors at Oxford approached me to edit it. They approached me in 2005 and I was still busy with a book that I was doing with a former member of this department named Ineke Sluiter. That work was called *Medieval Grammar and Rhetoric*, which was a big volume that we did together. When the editors at Oxford approached I was still really involved with that, so I did not get on with the work with this until 2009. It took five years from more or less active inception to bringing it out. It was a great thing to do and I am really pleased with it. It has twenty-five international authors and it is a serious attempt to understand how people in the Middle Ages, in this case medieval England, looked at antiquity. I hope that classicists and medievalists alike will read it. You probably hear every now and then in your classes that some

of the best manuscripts that we have for our Latin texts are early medieval. There is a huge gift that the Middle Ages gave to our understanding and preservation of classical antiquity. And so, classicists need to know about the period that conserved and transmitted their materials. I also fear that the general public thinks of the Middle Ages as just dark and full of terrible diseases and vicious religious wars. Well there is some of that, but there is some of that in all periods. The Middle Ages really wants to think very seriously about antiquity. They loved ancient philosophers. They love Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, and Seneca. They look up to these great, noble figures of the past.

**Will you talk a little about the courses you're teaching this semester?**

I am teaching an undergraduate course on literary theory, which I've been teaching now almost every year since I came to Penn. The course has gone through a couple of transformations since that time. I am really committed to the history of what it is that we call literary theory. I know that students encounter this big, fetishized thing called "theory." They either are scared of it and run away, or they encounter it and it does not make sense but they find it fascinating. But there is a reason why we think about literature theoretically. The reasons for that are also found in the history of thought about literature. I teach the course chronologically. We start with Plato and end somewhere around the modern, 20th-century philosopher Michel Foucault. The issues that we're still working with, contesting, and debating are issues that are already put in place in antiquity. Plato and Aristotle give us the fullest, earliest articulations around the notion of mimesis—what do we do when we represent? What is literary language supposed to do? Is literary language a distortion of truth? Where is truth? Can you get to truth outside of language? Those are some of the big questions that theory asks us now. Theory also asks question about intention and agency, about who is allowed to read and who is allowed to

interpret. All of those questions are formulated and reformulated over the centuries until we get to modernity, where they seem to be encased in very different kinds of discourses. But in reality, they are really addressing many of the same things. That is why I love that class. The graduate course I am teaching is a course on classical reception. It is a course on the philosopher Boethius who was executed around the year 524 A.D., and the reception of Boethius' *De Consolatione Philosophiae* in the Middle Ages and the early modern period. That class has been really hard to do, but it is also really gratifying, and I am enjoying it.

### **Where do you see Classical Studies moving in the next 10-20 years?**

What a great question; there are so many ways one could answer that. And I am speaking as a devoted, fellow traveler with Classics. First of all, I do think that there are many ways in which the canon that was agreed upon even twenty years ago is exploding in many directions. One thing that is becoming much more important and is now being brought into the center is the question of late antiquity, both Greek and Latin late antiquity. Another thing: let me use the example of Cam Grey's Peasant Project. There is a lot of interest in getting below the surface of historical record. There has always been interest, but now there is an interdisciplinary move. Cam has gone out and got himself a degree in Environmental Studies so he can figure out how to think about things like volcanoes that were not recorded in the historical narratives. I think that is really important. Archaeology gets together with Environmental Studies and historiography and tries to produce a thick description of culture, engaging scientific language as well as literary and traditional historical language. So I've given you two directions: a kind of opening up of temporalities beyond the traditional canonical periods, and things like the increasing interdisciplinarity of Classics. I really believe that Classics is amazingly healthy and endlessly interesting.