
 GERMAN STUDIES FROM THE MEDIEVAL TO THE FUTURE

Dr. Gerhild Scholz Williams has taught at Washington University in St. Louis since 1986 and has served as the Barbara Schaps Thomas and David M. Thomas Professor in the Humanities in Arts and Sciences since 1999. She has published five books, edited five more and written numerous articles. Her research focuses on witchcraft, magic, Johannes Praetorius, science and print media in the Early Modern Period. She has recently turned her attention towards the development of daily newspapers and their contemporaneous appearance in the literature of the 17th century. In addition to her academic endeavors, she has served in university administration since 1989, currently holding the position of Associate Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs.

FOCUS You wear a lot of hats at Washington University. You are a faculty member in both the Department of Germanic Languages and Literatures and the Committee on Comparative Literature in addition to your role in university administration. Despite this, you manage to publish an incredible amount of research. How do you successfully balance teaching, administration, research and writing and remain so productive?

GERHILD SCHOLZ WILLIAMS More than anything, I love all parts of my job(s). Second: I am blessed with a lot of energy as well as a sense of organization and order — I am known for running very efficient meetings — all of which enables me to do a number of things, if not simultaneously, then in rapid succession. Add to this the fact that I am working with and for a well functioning collegial department and administration, and, over the years, with several excellent research assistants, and you can see why I am able to do what I do. Finally, teaching and research have always constituted a happy balance for the administrative tasks, even if, on occasion, those became frustrating.

FOCUS Your research focuses on Medieval and Early Modern German and French Culture. In today's academic environment, this rich and fascinating period is often unfortunately under-appreciated

as departments foreground film and media studies, contemporary culture, and the 20th and 21st centuries. What attracted you to this period? Is this also what excites your students about this period?

GSW I moved from my training as a medievalist into the early modern period because of departmental needs: we had a medievalist in place when I joined the department. Since we could not both do the same, I began to move forward chronologically until I reached where I am now, the 17th century. I find this century to be hugely exciting because it reminds me of our present time, with all its turmoil (good and bad). This period experienced a communication revolution, culture wars, real wars, rapid movements and shifts in the geopolitical make up of Europe; gender quarrels and confusions; confrontations with the non-European Other. All of this speaks to me and thus, I hope, it speaks to my students.

FOCUS Your work frequently strikes a balance between history and cultural studies. Is one aspect more important than the other? Or are the two areas of research of equal interest in your eyes?

GSW I love my work exactly because it gets me engaged with literature, history, and culture. In fact, if I had not loved Comparative Literature so much, I might have been a historian. But Comparative Literature really afforded me the best playground for all my interests and talents, such as they are.

FOCUS Your current project spans both the development of the daily newspaper and its concomitant appearance in the novels of the 17th century. What about newspapers and their reincarnation in literature captured your interest?

GSW Media in the form of news papers and pamphlets have been on the minds of the European colleagues for some time. They have applied theorizing about media in the form of media studies to the period before 1700 earlier than has happened here in the US. I moved into media studies kind of sideways. I had published on witches. I wanted to do some more work on the science of demonology and came upon Johannes Praetorius who had published a hugely popular demonology, “Des Blockes-Berges

Verrichtung,” which served as an inspiration for Goethe. My work on Praetorius’ journalistic work inspired enough interest that I wrote a book about him. My research on Praetorius led me to the *Theatrum Europaeum* which brought me to Happel who used newsprint and the *Theatrum* in his novels, and here I am! Kind of very logical, in hindsight!

FOCUS For over a decade, your professional life has been split between your academic endeavors and university administration.

Do you find that your work in an academic department on various department, college or university faculty committees prepared you for your position as Associate Vice Chancellor? If not, how does this manner of university administration fundamentally differ from the sort of administration most faculty members encounter?

GSW Yes, such work did prepare me. It was on one of those committees working with the provost in the late eighties when I was asked to join his team as associate provost. During this time, I was also Department chair and I continued teaching. All aspects supported each other in that my work in the Central Administration helped me to know where to turn when I needed help with my chair’s duties. I do not believe that there is a fundamental difference in any kind of ACADEMIC administration, be that dean, chair, or faculty member on committees. The difference arises with the NON-ACADEMIC administration, like VP of finance, or student services, or admission, or development, etc. These positions are usually filled with non-academic colleagues, which does not mean that those who hold these positions don’t have degrees or advanced degrees.

FOCUS In your dual role as an academic and an administrator, you understand two vastly different perspectives on your university. How has your administrative position changed your perspective of your department and your role(s) as a teacher and faculty member?

GSW Not so much changed, broadened would be a better term, in both directions, I might add. I simply am more familiar with the workings of all the little wheels that make up an organization

such as ours. This helps me to understand why things are the way they are and where and how change could be introduced if change is needed.

FOCUS Recent trends to downsize German departments have unleashed an ongoing discussion within German Studies about our future. In response to the recent events at the University of Southern California, this discussion mushroomed in open letters and listservs, and a number of concrete suggestions have been made. As a Germanist and an administrator, what do you think the future holds for German Studies in the US?

GSW I could not venture a guess: this is a question that will be answered less by individual institutions and more by the cultural and political developments to which these institutions respond. Just recently I read the Millennial Issue of the *German Quarterly* (73.1/2000), "A Colloquium on the State of the Discipline." I would recommend these essays as instructive reading to all of us. I share the assessments offered there: we need to stay the course, not abandon language to culture but do both. What are we, if we do not teach German language but only literature and culture, possibly increasingly in English? I don't mean to say that courses in translation are not important, but this should not come at the expense of language on all levels. If we neglect what makes us special, if we do not make a strong and persuasive case for our discipline as German, or any other language, we will lose our place to other disciplines. Of course, we need to look across our disciplinary boundaries to the neighbors (gender, culture studies, film, etc.) and support others, students and faculty, to strengthen them and us with our talents, ideas, and energies. But we also need to support language programs in schools on all levels however this can be done. I am distressed about the USC debacle; many of the suggestions made to improve or reverse the situation seem cogent to me. I hope the colleagues and administrators will advocate for re-institution of German Studies in a reasonable form.

Todd Heidt conducted the interview via email on June 4, 2008.
