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Review

*Min-Zhan Lu and
Elizabeth Robertson*

Life Writing as Social Acts

Jane Maher. *Mina P. Shaughnessy: Her Life and Work*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1997. 331 pages.\$25.95

In the acknowledgments to *Mina P. Shaughnessy: Her Life and Work*, Jane Maher says of her subject that, “we can see our best selves in her: when we put our students’ needs before all else; when we refuse to accept the opinion of others about our students’ ability and worth; when we help our students to recognize and employ the power of language; when we acknowledge as Mina did, ‘that we cannot isolate the phenomenon of disadvantage from the society that caused it’” (x). In thus stating how she intends her biography to be read, Maher also offers her view on the “best” of Shaughnessy’s efforts as a teacher, researcher, and administrator, and on her ability to draw the best out of those she worked with in spite of the “peculiar burden” of having to work under “terrible conditions” surrounding the City University of New York’s open admissions program between 1967 and 1978 (ix).

This is an account of Shaughnessy’s life and work of the sort that we have encountered in previously published tributes by Adrienne Rich, Bob Lyons, Leonard Kriegel, and Irving Howe. Maher deepens this view of Shaughnessy with excerpts from her published and unpublished writings, her private correspondence, as well as from 40 interviews with people who had known or worked with Shaughnessy. Maher seeks to demonstrate that she is not alone in having “always admired Mina Shaughnessy’s

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work and [having] understood how deserving she was of the reputation she had as a leader, the leader in our field" ("Writing" 52).

Her biography then, performs a service in bringing together into one place not only the many stories, eulogies and tributes which honor Mina Shaughnessy, but also (in the appendices) her collected journal articles, and a useful bibliography of works by and about Shaughnessy. For readers already familiar with Shaughnessy's published work, the most intriguing information stems from two sources. We hear Shaughnessy's brother George Pendo and friend Priscilla Weaver Brandt talk about Shaughnessy's South Dakota days, her life as a communications undergraduate at Northwestern University, and her efforts to make it in New York during her twenties, first as an actress, then as a teacher. And we hear two of Shaughnessy's SEEK students who also worked on the staff at the Center talk about their CUNY days. Shaughnessy's correspondence with her family and Priscilla also give us glimpses into her state of mind and style of writing before and outside the professional context in which she built her career.

As readers interested in the history of basic writing and Shaughnessy's place within that field, we find that her biography raises a number of intriguing questions. We are most concerned with how Maher's book relates to the ongoing work of teachers in the field of basic writing. Understanding how Maher and her informants go about representing Shaughnessy's life and work thus becomes a matter of prime concern. We see both the biographer and the informants as actively engaged in forming—giving a shape to—Shaughnessy's life as they talk and write about her. We read this information not only to get a sense of what they know and how they feel about Shaughnessy, but also to examine the questions they have chosen to bring (or not bring) to the project. Specific questions emerge: How is this one segment of the profession defining a writing teacher's "life" and "work"—in particular, the life and work of a teacher of basic writing? What is their sense of the key relationships involved, of the conflicts within and across these relationships, and of the ideal way to negotiate such conflicts? (We use "way" in the singular here because Maher gives us access only to comments which support one another.) To what extent is the particular perspective Maher coordinates from her sources pertinent for the field in general as we enter the 21st century? How might individual readers, given the particular context of each one's own work and life, use the book's information and perspective to reflect on and revise the conditions of their work and life?

These are important questions for all biographical and ethnographic projects, but particularly for this book. For to ask us to "see our best selves in" Shaughnessy as "the leader in our field" inevitably asks each of us to approach Shaughnessy's life and work with our own understanding of the

“best” (and “worst”) of the field and of our own lives and work. It is perhaps worth noting here that Maher often treats the “field” of composition as self-evident rather than as an ongoing, dynamic, conflicted and complex process. That is, Maher does not acknowledge the extent to which one’s own sense of the field is shaped by the changing conditions of one’s professional life. For instance, we have found ourselves continually revising our own understandings of Shaughnessy’s work in response to shifts in student population, in institutional conditions, and in our professional identities as we have moved from large research universities to a community college to a private midwestern four-year college through a variety of positions (graduate student, adjunct, visiting professor, tenure-track, tenured). To continue to make Shaughnessy’s work viable, all of us need to reflect upon what sense of the field informs our interest in Shaughnessy’s life and work.

To explore these questions, we focus here on Maher’s rendering of three aspects of Shaughnessy’s life and work: her ability to make cogent use of her lived experience of educational disadvantage while fighting for students’ academic rights within a hostile, unforgiving environment; her effective use of her striking presence in the interests of her students’ education; and the way in which her working life was driven by a perceived lack in her private life. Maher highlights these aspects by setting up two trajectories: first, Shaughnessy’s “professional” relations with language, students, colleagues, administrators, scholarship, and institutional forces; and second, her “personal” relations with friends and a family defined in terms of parents, siblings, a husband, an anonymous lover, and (the absence of) children. The Shaughnessy admired by Maher is a person able to find connections among, and bring consistency to, her personal and professional relationships out of her love for language and justice. The occasional ambivalence we hear centers, in the words of Adrienne Rich, on Shaughnessy’s “need to keep parts of her life separated” (239). This Shaughnessy seems “imprisoned” in a “beauty” (102) to which it was “so hard to be stone blind” (239), and keeps her thoughts on her “private” life to herself and her priest (75, 239). Thus, both Maher’s admiration for and ambivalence toward her subject indicate an interest in acknowledging the intersection between the personal and the professional and a need for positive leads in negotiating the conflicts within and across these two areas of life.

From Dakota to the Coasts

Shaughnessy’s ability to link lived experience with academic work is expressed structurally through the titles of the book chapters, which establish her life’s progression toward the “Grand Experiment” (Chapter 7) on literacy, which earned Shaughnessy a proclamation signed by President Jimmy

Carter. This experiment is sustained by “The House [that is, program] that Mina Built” (Chapter 4) and her knowledge of “Errors and Expectations” (Chapter 6), both aimed at and contributing to Chapter 5, “Towards a More Democratic Educational System.” It is an experiment which originates in the “Full and Good World” (Chapter 1) where Shaughnessy lived before coming to New York City. It involves “A Necessary Prelude” (Chapter 2) between 1946–56 when she grapples with (as Shaughnessy puts it in a letter to her friend) “the problem of a profession.” And it builds on “Experience and Dedication” (Chapter 3) gleaned from jobs she took between 1956–67 while struggling to obtain a full-time college-level teaching position.

This linear progression rests on two classic American plots: the Journey East to the heart of “civilization” and the Journey West to conquer the “frontier.” These motifs were self-consciously and variously employed by Shaughnessy in her own Introduction to *Errors and Expectations* and by Emig, Lyons, Howe, and Rich in their published tributes to Shaughnessy. The Journey East takes our heroine into the heart of New York social life and (in the words of the man at City College who hired Shaughnessy in 1967) into “one of the most elitist [English departments] in the country” (88), while the journey in the opposite direction takes her, in Shaughnessy’s own words, to the “frontier” or the “pedagogical West” (*Errors* 4). It is Shaughnessy’s apparent ability to straddle both worlds that intrigues Maher and her informants.

We are told from the first paragraph that “Mina Pendo Shaughnessy seemed to be the quintessential New Yorker: tall and beautiful, sophisticated, well spoken, well read, well dressed, interested in literature, art, music, and politics” (1). Upon first meeting her in 1967, a colleague thought she was “a typical upper East Sider, well dressed, stately, very well bred” (1). The book supports this impression throughout, not only by the words of other informants, but also by a photograph of Shaughnessy and her husband in evening dress taken on their way to a dinner with Mayor John V. Lindsay (92). However, Maher’s opening paragraph also shows us that this particular colleague was wrong to presume that Shaughnessy taught writing to disadvantaged students “out of a sense of *noblesse oblige*” (1). He had confused what Shaughnessy “seemed” with what she was and therefore had been “flabbergasted” to learn from Shaughnessy of her Midwest origin (1). Using this colleague’s misunderstanding of Shaughnessy, Maher sets up one of the questions driving her project: how to make sense of the seeming discrepancy between Shaughnessy’s “Upper East Sider” appearance and her “devotion” to the “disadvantaged” students. The answer she provides is that Shaughnessy was able to be both because of her solid roots in her Midwest experiences and values.

Citing Adrienne Rich, Maher depicts Shaughnessy as solidly “grounded in her experience as a South Dakota-born daughter of immigrants” (110).

Again and again, we hear testimonies to her ability to move with dexterity across the cultural and economic divide, an ability stemming from a willingness to use her lived experience to inform her professional activities. In this Shaughnessy, we see personified the ideal student we dream of producing in ourselves and our students. And we find it hard not to read this story of Shaughnessy against the backdrop of two famous disadvantaged students, Eliza Doolittle in *My Fair Lady*, the film version of Shaw's *Pygmalion*, and the "scholarship boy" in Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy*. In her colleague's "misreading" of Shaughnessy, we experience the same gratification we feel when Eliza Doolittle fools the language expert brought in by the social snobs to police London high society. The pressure for Shaughnessy to negotiate this conflict was strong. We learn, for example, that on the application form for Northwestern University, Shaughnessy reported her father's eighth grade education as "four years of high school" (19) and that in an "Acting Notebook" she kept, there is a section called "Midwest Menace," in which she detailed methods for avoiding the "Midwest R" (22). In spite of such displays of academic ambition, our heroine seems able to stay in tune with the values she inherited from home. Maher's Shaughnessy is never quite Hoggart's "scholarship boy." Rather, she is an Eliza Doolittle synthesizing the best of her Manhattan world with the best of her miner/rancher world of home. She is an Eliza Doolittle fully at home with the Professor Higginses of the world in appearance and spirit, but patiently trying to teach them to acknowledge the "intelligence" of the "disadvantaged" and to bring their world to the latter. It is, indeed, the stuff Hollywood movies are made of.

Two clusters of stories establish Shaughnessy's ability to bridge the discrepancies of her life. The first cluster focuses on a Shaughnessy who is continuously testing academic definitions of "intelligence" against her lived experience of economic disadvantage. Using references to her brother George's account of their Dakota childhood and family correspondence, Maher details Shaughnessy's first-hand knowledge of the working poor, especially the brutality of their work as miners and ranchers, the inadequate economic return for their labor, and their lack of educational opportunities. Among the primary sources is a letter from Shaughnessy's father to her mother the year she was born. Found crowded in the back of a Homestake Mining Company time sheet the size of an index card, it is reproduced in the text in its original, penciled scrawl with all its errors intact:

My Dear Little Wife:

Since eating my supper last nite the thought come's back to me that two years ago, lacking a few months, we pledged ourselves to be as one always considerate of each other, it occurred to me that as time goes on we may become lax in certain of our duties which so far you have so nobly performed.

Far be it from my intensions to reflect in any way upon your past performance of these duties but it behooves us all to be constantly on the lookout for little tasks which if neglected work discord while if willingly performed create & maintain harmony which is essential to happiness. Not wishing in any way to impose upon you and making allowance for past favors there still remains one thing. Please when you put a hamburger sandwich in my lunch put an onion in it. Trusting you will take this in the right spirit. I remain your devoted husband. (5)

Like Maher, we were struck by the resemblance between this note and some of the student writings Shaughnessy collects and discusses in *Errors and Expectations*. Maher thus makes it “easy” to “imagine Mina thinking of her own father” when she was reading her student papers, writing *Errors and Expectations*, or listening to other professors complaining about her students (“Writing” 54; see also *Life and Work* 191).

Through Maher’s informants, we see a Shaughnessy who lived up to two dicta: First, the personal is political. Second, all systems of discrimination are interlocked. Adrienne Rich concludes: “Perhaps [she] understood experientially that if you looked a certain way (tall and blond and beautiful, or black or Puerto Rican) you could be perceived as ‘dumb’” (110). Using her lived experience with certain stereotypes, that of the “dumb blond” and the “ignorant poor,” this Shaughnessy saw through the “embedded racism and intellectual arrogance” her colleagues expressed towards her students (110). So when Shaughnessy’s (self-identified) African-American secretary Dorthea McGill claims that “she didn’t see color; she saw need” (106), we are simultaneously more willing to accept Rich’s reading of Shaughnessy, more impressed by Shaughnessy’s creative use of the experiential, and more appreciative of her ability not to let differences in physical appearance obscure shared needs and disadvantages caused by economic inequality.

The second cluster of stories shows Shaughnessy balancing the demands of administration, teaching, and research within an environment often hostile to her work and the students she served. Even under these difficulties, she was good at winning support for policies and programs, recruiting talent while developing camaraderie among instructors, all the while sustaining an “intellectual, research-oriented approach to teaching writing” (97). Colleagues admire Shaughnessy not only for recognizing and hiring talented people but also for her ability to “bring out their best instincts and efforts” (244). Part of her appeal, one of them observes, comes from Shaughnessy’s being an intellectual: “She was the first person any of us had ever met who was making a formal, scholarly inquiry into the teaching of ‘basic’ writing” (97). One member of the staff recalls Shaughnessy’s refusal to be a “typical administrator”; even during the

height of her academic success, she arranged to tutor basic writing students once a week, returning to the office “refreshed and reinvigorated” afterwards (179). She “never lost the joy of teaching” (179), her secretary and friend Marilyn Maiz concludes.

Shaughnessy’s effort to juggle her disparate duties is made even more impressive by a devotion to students which eclipsed personal ambition (150). A former chair, Ed Quinn, maintains that she “got so much done” because she “didn’t need credit” (150). “She never lost sight of her goal—to see to it that more and more students succeeded at City.” One of Shaughnessy’s first students at City, Lottie Wilkins, whom Maher identifies as African-American, confirms this reading from the opposite end of the academic hierarchy: “You didn’t have to be bright to earn Mina’s attention, you just had to be willing” (112). Wilkins’ Shaughnessy was always eager to “sit you down” to figure out what exactly was going wrong with your writing and “do absolutely anything to get you to the next step” (112). In short, Maher’s Shaughnessy models two ways of living our professional lives: (1) contest the divisions between theoretical knowledge and lived experience, academic and social interests, scholarship and teaching, literature and composition, and administration and faculty; and (2) put the interest of “disadvantaged” students above all else.

And yet, when depicting the resistance Shaughnessy encountered from the English faculty at City and her managing to “rise above” their “petty behavior” (100–03), one colleague recalls that the only time he had heard Shaughnessy complain was when she called at night and said, “I don’t need this job, you know” (102). Similarly, Adrienne Rich, in praising Shaughnessy’s interest in hiring teachers imaginative, responsible, and lucid enough to “benefit the students,” remembers that “it never occurred to Mina that the teaching of basic writing could be a mere task” (108–09). These observations suggest that, given the institutional tradition of dichotomizing the teacher’s academic (pure) and economic (personal, impure) interests, a simplistic affirmation of Shaughnessy’s commitment to the students could lead to an irresponsible dismissal of the full complexity of individual teachers’ reasons for “needing” a job. We should be careful that our admiration for Shaughnessy does not turn her into a model for dismissing as “impure” individual teachers’ concerns to acknowledge material needs which the academy, out of its interest to further exploit teachers, may present as contradictory to the needs of students.

The Work of Presence

In narrating Shaughnessy’s life and work, Maher and her informants also link Shaughnessy’s success with her striking presence. By “presence,” we

have in mind the sense we gain of another person's motives and attitudes as construed from our perception of that person's appearance and demeanor. For instance, in Maher's opening paragraph, she acknowledges the ways "presence" can mediate the reception of one's work when she notes that a colleague of Shaughnessy, impressed by her being "well dressed, stately and very well bred," attributed her drive to a sense of *noblesse oblige* (1). Another colleague, Les Berger, says, "It's hard to describe the effect she had on us...to put it simply, she was strikingly beautiful" (102). Maher observes that "almost twenty years after her death, [her beauty] is often the first thing people comment on when they are asked to discuss Mina Shaughnessy and her work" (102).

We have two problems with Maher's representation of Shaughnessy's beauty. First, Maher notices only the sexist undertones of these comments, but misses the class and racial assumptions embedded in her informants' depiction of Shaughnessy's beauty, "personal charm" (98), and "charisma" (99). But as Pierre Bourdieu has argued, taste for certain types of "presence" is a culturally-constructed disposition linked to class and race position. Standards of beauty are always race and class specific. We can see this in the specific markers of Shaughnessy's "beauty": blond hair, blue eyes, tall and slim figure, well-defined cheekbones, Upper East Side taste in clothing, makeup and perfume, a clear and pleasing voice (164), a way of carrying and using her body ("graceful," "striking," "stately," "well bred"). Reading these descriptions of Shaughnessy, we need to realize that cultural assumptions shape our taste or distaste for particular looks, body types, and ways of dressing and using the body. Such issues of taste are relevant to all of us interested in teaching and writing against racism, sexism, homophobia, and class inequality.

Second, by including comments on Shaughnessy's beauty, Maher acknowledges the work performed by "presence"—the ways it affects working relations. As Maher points out: "The effect of Mina's beauty on her success simply cannot be ignored" (102). Yet, Maher seems most interested in foregrounding the positive effect Shaughnessy's presence had on her work: her ability to use her beauty and charm to invoke and retain the interest of teachers, administrators, and students. Shaughnessy effectively used the academic elitists' reverence towards the "beauty and poise" she embodied to keep them from directly confronting her (102–03), to entice them to make a point of "knowing" her and thus, in some cases, hearing out what she had to say and even recognizing the "perfect sense" she was able to make of her students and their writings (101–03). As Maiz puts it: "if she was going to use her charm for anything or anyone, it was going to be for her students" (115). But if Shaughnessy's "beauty" is indeed a marker of her success, to what extent is her model viable for those of us

who could not, would not, do not emulate her beauty, nor her use of her beauty? This question needs to be raised and addressed before we can honor Maher's call to follow Shaughnessy's lead in the specific contexts of our individual lives and work.

This question is particularly relevant for this biography since other stories suggest that Shaughnessy's beauty was effective because it also accompanied a respectful manner toward the elites. For instance, one of Shaughnessy's colleagues, Bob Lyons, recalls that when others at the CUNY Graduate Center opposed Shaughnessy's desire to offer a graduate-level course (because she lacked a PhD), Shaughnessy "stayed out of the fray" and acted as if she "was not as offended" as Lyons himself was. Lyons linked this demeanor to her "enormous respect for the 'academy'—the traditions of academics and the canon" (175). Another administrator, Les Berger, remembers "[she] would hold her head up high, look people in the eye. She would never get into a struggle or an argument. Even the elitists on campus didn't tangle with Mina directly" (103). This Shaughnessy "did not take her detractors personally nor did she engage in confrontations with them" (94). Maher then concludes that this "reaction was based in part on the innate respect she held for professors" (94). We read these stories as suggesting that part of Shaughnessy's signature at CUNY was a demeanor which conveyed her respect for the traditions and canons safeguarded by her detractors and her desire to bring the canons to her students. In other words, she was able to find space for basic writing teachers and students "inside" the academic tradition and canon (175) because she struck the detractors as not only "beautiful" but also as appropriately respectful. Such demand for respect by elites from composition teachers unfortunately remains surprisingly familiar to us despite the passage of time and the increasing status of composition that trailblazers like Shaughnessy have achieved. Therefore, we must ask: If the efficacy of Shaughnessy's pedagogical and administrative practices depended in part on her beauty combined with her "good" manners, to what extent is the model she provides viable for those of us who might appear to the elites as ugly, clumsy, unsophisticated, or contentious?

We need to be more careful, then, about what we make of these stories of Shaughnessy's presence. When exploring the work performed on our teaching and inter-collegial relations by a particular perception of presence, we need to broaden our notion of effectiveness beyond the book's definition. That is, we need to contest the equation of a particular type of appearance and manner with mental and emotional qualities such as "intelligence" (110), "passion for language and justice," "fairness" (111) or "moral authority"—"a devotion to something beyond herself" (164). And we need to become more vigilant towards our own efforts to construct and

use our bodies when teaching and persuading colleagues and administrators. Why are certain presences effective? For whom? And with what consequences on the life and work of others who pose alternative presences?

Constructing the Personal

A third aspect of the biography centers on the question of how to construe the nature of Shaughnessy's personal relationships within the frame of her professional success. For example, Adrienne Rich explains that while she felt that she and Shaughnessy loved and learned from one another, their "friendship was never really intimate, not as I have known intimate friendship, a fact I recognized and pondered for a long time. I felt I had to respect her defense, her need to keep parts of her life separated, though I deplored this" (171). Rich then goes on to describe Shaughnessy as "partly imprisoned both in her beauty, to which it was so hard to be stone blind, and in the subtle defenses of a lifetime, which compartmentalized her being, causing her, I believe, much pain, for which she herself saw no possible remedy or relief" (239). Maher reads Rich as "expos[ing] that part of Mina—the spiritual and emotional insecurity—that had remained hidden to so many of her friends and colleagues" (239). The language of "defense," "insecurity," "imprisonment," lack of control, and "compartmentalization" recurs in Maher's discussion of Shaughnessy's reticence toward her "personal" life, especially her marriage with Donald Shaughnessy (170). That Shaughnessy would remain married for 20 years after having decided to "have separate interests and follow separate paths" from her husband is cause for wonder (75, 170) by Maher, who expects Shaughnessy "to have the same control in her personal life" as in her professional life (170).

We find ourselves inscribed within this discourse, especially since we admire women like Adrienne Rich who have spoken frankly and wisely about the trials and triumphs of their personal as well as professional lives and taught us so much about our own lives. Thus, we too might expect someone like Shaughnessy to construct the personal as well as the professional against the dominant grain of social institutions which deny the interest of women. Yet, as Shaughnessy has so eloquently reminded us, our sense of others' errors in textual (and, we might add, non-discursive) performances cannot be separated from our socially constructed expectations. We should not let our preference for certain ways of talking and writing about private life justify dismissing colleagues' alternative ways of living and talking about their "personal" lives. The language of "defense," "insecurity," and "imprisonment" may make those alternative choices appear passive. But if we are interested in the political uses of the personal, we

need to listen more responsively and responsibly to the potential social and subversive reasoning motivating such choices.

This is important because psychologizing is the dominant mode Maher uses as she interprets how and why Shaughnessy worked so hard. Maher asserts that “Mina’s inability to have children and her decision to ‘have separate interests and follow separate paths’ from her husband, are crucial factors in any consideration of her motives and performances as a teacher and writer” (75). This conclusion concurs with Les Berger’s observation that Shaughnessy’s belief that her “personal life” was less satisfying to her was perhaps “one of the reasons why she worked so hard” (170). This calls to mind Patricia Laurence’s comment that Shaughnessy was “very single minded, very dedicated. Various people in the group gave birth to their children during this period, and many of us were in doctoral programs at the time. We all led very complicated lives. Mina was freer than we were in many senses” (98).

By attributing Shaughnessy’s work style to her “inability to have children,” her having a less than “successful marriage,” or her being “freer than others,” such comments dramatize certain expectations about an individual teacher’s “personal” life (75). This participation in the discourse of displacement and sublimation tends to cast as “abnormal” the professional energy and motivation of those colleagues who live their personal lives outside the institution of the conventional family.

Insisting on linking Shaughnessy’s commitment to students to a lack in her personal life is all the more troubling in light of other discourses surrounding her devotion. First, the social and political dimension of her devotion to students is undercut by being linked to her longing for (non-existent) children. Second, her interest in students is depicted as “far above the politics swirling around her” (99). Shaughnessy’s motives are “genuine” because they stem, in the words of one colleague, from “an inner faith” reminding her of Mother Teresa (99). Maher echoes this perception in stating, “I am not using that word [devotion] lightly: Mina was absolutely devoted to her students—she put them above all else, especially politics” (“Writing” 54). What troubles us is not the move to acknowledge the potential spiritual and complex emotional sources of Shaughnessy’s devotion to her students, but the implicit need to put in the gutter any motives which might be perceived as deviating from traditional notions of academic impartiality. For instance, to voice their opposition to Open Admissions, opponents placed pornographic photographs printed with the word “whore” in Shaughnessy’s mailbox (94). The obviously opposite cultural value of the signs “Mother” (Teresa) vs. “whore” should not blind us to the discomfort the condemnation and the praise both express. In the

eyes of her opponents, devotion to the education of the poor is "illicit," driven by political, non-academic motives, thereby prostituting the real, proper role of the academy. Yet, in presenting that devotion in terms of either spiritual inner faith or natural maternal longing, and therefore as "genuine" and "above politics," her admirers simply reproduce, rather than subvert, the dichotomy between the academic/political, thus supporting the insult launched through the signifier "whore."

Among the passages Shaughnessy underlined in her copy of the *Letters to A Teacher*, and which Maher included in her biography, is this statement: "To get to know the children of the poor and to love politics are one and the same thing" (111). If indeed Shaughnessy saw her work with the children of the poor as "political," as her underlining of this quotation suggests, to move her work "beyond politics" does not do her justice. Even though the discourse of politics and displacement within the academy was different in Shaughnessy's era than in our own, it is nevertheless important to examine how a particular complex of personal and professional decisions constitutes a deliberate participation in politics.

To make "life writing" a social act, we need to acknowledge that the questions we bring (or do not bring) to our research have political consequences for how we perceive and participate in this field. One question is most noticeably absent from Maher's construction of Shaughnessy's work: What effect has her scholarship had on the intellectual practices of composition studies? Though, for example, the personal history of the writing and publication of *Errors and Expectation* is offered in detail, Maher says nothing about the 20 years of scholarship in the field which responds to Shaughnessy's research. This absence risks reducing the work of composition primarily to a matter of interpersonal skills rather than a discipline which also involves rigorous intellectual dialogue. Would we feel such an absence acceptable in, say, a biography of James Berlin's life and work? We need to consider seriously the politics of such a deletion, the implicit norm of pertinence it sets up, particularly given the history of viewing Basic Writing as elementary, sub-college-level work involving only teaching and service, never scholarship. Shaughnessy's writing challenges this view, making it clear that Basic Writing was a fit subject for scholarly research. Indeed, her scholarship has provoked critical exchange and understanding about the nature of writing and teaching across all areas of English studies, including the teaching of literature and advanced composition. To write Shaughnessy's life and work without addressing that scholarship reduces the scope of her contribution to the field. To use "life writing" as a point of departure to revise one's own life and work demands that one examine both the politics of the life of the biographical subject as well as the politics of one's own construction of that life.

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