Interview with Anne Prescott

Barnard College English Professor

Location: 408C Barnard Hall

Time Length: 54:28

Conducted by Elizabeth Moye

April 8, 2015



Anne Prescott is the Helen Goodhart Altschul Professor of English and Medieval & Renaissance Studies at Barnard College. Prescott came to Barnard in 1967 after receiving her A.B. from Barnard College and her M.A. and Ph.D. from Columbia University. Prescott has taught a variety of courses at Barnard, including the one she is teaching now on Shakespeare. Prescott has been a dedicated faculty member since her arrival, and, in fact, was Chair of the Department for many years. Prescott has made very substantial contributions to scholarship in her field and to the study and teaching of literature. For the purpose of this interview, Prescott provides the perspective of a Barnard faculty member during the time period of the Barnard-Columbia merger discussion.

E. Moye:

This is an interview with Anne Prescott, who is a professor in the Barnard English Department and was at the time of the Barnard-Columbia merger discussion. Today I am going to be asking her some questions about that time period at Barnard. So the first question I would like to ask you is if you could tell me a little bit about your decision to join the faculty at Barnard, as well as your experience here when you began teaching.

A. Prescott:

My motives are very simple. I spent my senior year here at Barnard, after three years at Harvard and then a year in Paris, and I came to love Barnard. I felt more comfortable here as a woman than I had at Harvard. I felt that the faculty cared about young women in ways that the Harvard faculty didn’t. I may be being unfair, but this was the late 50s, and there it is. I got my doctorate at Columbia and was invited by my Chaucer and Shakespeare professors to grade papers for them. So I graded papers. And then they needed somebody to teach First-Year English—English A as we called it then—so I taught that. Then when I got my degree, I said to the Chair of the Department: “What should I do now?” And he said: “Well, you’re going to go on teaching here as an Assistant Professor.” Nobody had consulted me. I just went on. Since my husband worked in New York, I was ecstatic to be on the faculty. In those days you didn’t have to do a search. You see, you just got whom you wanted. And you could phone your friend at Princeton and say: “Have you got anybody good to teach Chaucer here?”—and no nation-wide search.

E. Moye:

That must have been a little bit easier.

A. Prescott:

It was easier if you knew people. It was not easier if you were brilliant and from a different part of the country. Our system is better nowadays—more fair.

E. Moye:

So can you tell me a little bit about your understanding of Barnard’s relationship to Columbia at that time—when you first started?

A. Prescott:

When I first started, a friend of mine, who taught at Columbia, reminded me that it had shifted with the years. And we would have phases of being close, phases of being distinct. When I first began here was 1968—this was not a happy year at Columbia. Headlines in the *New York Times* all the time, student take-overs of many of the buildings, so I began with a bolt of lightening—my career here. Within a few years I was being asked to teach part-time at Columbia, so I taught two courses at Columbia and four courses at Barnard. In those days it was three-three. So I was part-time Columbia, and I went to their departmental meetings—I knew them. It was ridiculous: I would teach a course on the 16th century at Columbia, cross Broadway, teach a course on the 16th century—the same course—at Barnard. Eventually Columbia said I’m only allowed one course over there—in the graduate school—because having so many Barnard professors was getting expensive. So we got rationed. [Laughs]

E. Moye:

Okay. So when you began hearing about the merger that would have been quite a few years after you had started teaching here. So can you point to the time that you began hearing about the merger?

A. Prescott:

No I can’t. And you know more about it than I do, because the years have merged in my mind. And I don’t know—to be perfectly honest with you—whether it was the 70s or the 80s. You might.

E. Moye:

Okay. I would say it was the 70s. Probably ’75 or ’76 is when it would have become relevant to you.

A. Prescott:

We were, at that point, still reeling from the late 60s at Columbia. Remember Berkeley? I told my sister, who was involved there: “That would never happen at Columbia.” We were still reeling. It had been a traumatic experience for a lot of us. So whether the University could go on being itself was an issue. And this had relevance—and this gets into what you’re talking about; ,what had relevance especially was the feeling that we needed to change the curriculum, because of student demands. So, at Barnard, we dropped our requirements for taking courses before a certain period, you know—and then discovered that students were graduating not knowing anything about Chaucer, and so on. So we invented the so-called Junior Colloquium to make up for that. Then the times changed, and we reinstated the distribution requirements [laughs] that we now have—these two things going on. And one of the issues was, of course, if we merged with Columbia, what do we do about—in the English Departments—what do we do about distribution requirements? Do we have any requirements? What should they be? And especially, in my case, what do you do about the first year?

E. Moye:
Can you go into that a little bit more—your job to merge the two courses?

A. Prescott:

I met with somebody from Columbia, and I can’t remember his name, and we went over their system of the required Lit-Hum, and, at this point in my senescence, I can’t remember exactly what their requirements are. I taught in the grad school just last year, but I’m no longer close to that department the way I was for many years, and I can’t remember exactly what the requirements were, aside from Lit-Hum. Edward Tayler, I know, helped invent the system. Then at Barnard we had First-Year English. You had to take a whole year of First-Year English, and that was about it. And the problem was how to merge our required First-Year English—they were pretty similar—we eventually did decide to have different topics to give the students the illusion of choice. But at Columbia they had a much more rigid system, and, when I met with this guy, we came up with a plan. I am embarrassed to say I can’t remember exactly what the plan was. I took it to the English Department, and it got voted down after considerable angry discussion about what was wrong with Columbia. And the conversation sort of devolved between us and Columbia. They were saying, I heard, that Barnard is just a “smorgasbord”—that was the term, a smorgasbord—if you’re a freshman you can sort of pick and choose. We said they were imprisoning and rigid [laughs], and we believed in freedom. And so my department said: “We refuse to merge with anything that rigid.”

E. Moye:

Did that reflect your own personal understanding?

A. Prescott:

No, I thought that actually Columbia’s system looked pretty good. I could see my own department’s point of view, but I thought that to require all students to have read certain things was not bad in a university that wants to civilize people. On the other hand, being a wimp, I could also see Barnard’s point of view. I had come from a university with rigid demands, but also some choice in which rigid demand [laughs] you could have. You had to have a Humanities, a Social Science, and a Natural Science, but within that you could choose. We all had to take the same freshman English.

E. Moye:

Okay. And aside from your understanding both perspectives, did you think that Barnard should merge into Columbia as a whole?

A. Prescott:

I’ll tell you what I thought. I felt like the Greek maiden Leda as the swan approaches her. How do you say no to Zeus? You know. What I felt was overwhelmed. Columbia is big. It’s like living—as somebody pointed out at the time at our meeting over this—we had a 10-ton gorilla in the room, and how can we preserve our independence if the 10-ton gorilla wants to take over? So I felt fear. And I think a number of my colleagues in the English Department did too. And we thought: merger is probably inevitable, and the problem is not just that Barnard—which is a great college—will disappear, but that the faculty at Barnard will disappear. A lot of the English Department would disappear. May I tell you—there’s a reason especially why?

E. Moye:

Please!

A. Prescott:

Yeah. The Barnard English Department has had a curious history. I know this won’t record: but you can see a line, and then a dip, and then coming up again—in terms of publishing distinction outside the University. When I came there were still people here who had had a very distinguished career, but Barnard was in period of caring so much about teaching, we had a number of—I know, I spent a year here as a student—absolutely brilliant teachers who had not published, or very little. Including one who didn’t even finish her Ph.D. Then at Columbia you have these people who’ve published a lot. Then, and that was in that period—the merger—you see threatened. So if we merged with Columbia, they could legitimately say: “Okay, she’s a good teacher. Where are her publications, where’s her book, where are her articles? We want distinguished people, not just good teachers.” Then Barnard began to care more. So now we have a bunch of very distinguished professors whom Columbia has to respect. I’ve published more than a lot of them have. So the merger possibility hit us at a vulnerable time.

E. Moye:

So a lot of the research that I’ve done supports exactly what you’re saying, and this is an incredible affirmation actually. [Both laugh]

A. Prescott:

I’m so glad, Lizzie!

E. Moye:

But what I have read is that Columbia seemed like a coercive force ready to—

A. Prescott:

Ready to rape us?

E. Moye:

Basically. And I talked to an alumna, for example, who told me that she felt as though Columbia was performing this “power grab,” and I’m wondering if you could tell me your perspective on that?

A. Prescott:

That Columbia was performing a “power grab?” I would agree. That is what it felt like, subjectively. And, to repeat, we were still in post-shock of the late 60s, which exploded at Columbia more than any other place except Berkeley—and Paris and Czechoslovakia—those were the—historically—the two big ones. [Laughs] And so we were feeling a little naked and vulnerable. And then along comes the 10-ton gorilla. What Columbia did do was of course to take women, and then we waited to disappear. Who would apply to us if they could apply to Columbia? Didn’t happen.

E. Moye:
Here we are!

A. Prescott:

Here we are. Here we are. And I shouldn’t let you record this, but my granddaughter’s just gotten into Barnard, and at the last minute she decided not to apply to Columbia [laughs] because she thought we were more what she needed in the sciences.

E. Moye:

That’s wonderful. That’s exactly what happened to me in many ways. My dad was a graduate student and taught at Columbia and because of my dad and my mom I was only applying to Barnard—because of the distinction of the student life here. It’s very different.

A. Prescott:

Yes, yes, it is. I love Columbia, and, because I’m mostly retired, I just teach one course a term; I no longer am invited to teach there. It’s a bit of a cold place—although I loved my career at Columbia teaching grad students. But still, I think we didn’t believe in ourselves enough, those of us who were afraid. I went to a dinner party at Yale with my late husband, we knew a professor up there, and Yale at that point was thinking of merging with—I think it was—Vassar, and I asked the Chair of—I think—the English Department: “But what would you do with the Vassar faculty?” (If it was Vassar.) And there was an embarrassed silence, and I thought: Uh-oh. Because this was during the merger talks here at Columbia, and it might be different now, but we were vulnerable and scared in my department.

E. Moye:

Sure. And another thing that you were just talking about reminded me of the desire on Columbia’s part to have greater power—or greater decision-making ability—over the tenuring procedure at Barnard.

A. Prescott:

Ah, yes. I was on the tenuring committee at that point, when this happened. Yes.

E. Moye:

And a lot of that—I’m assuming, based on what you’re saying—had to do with what Barnard professors had published, how much they had contributed.

A. Prescott:
Yes, and I’ve been—because I was Chair of the department I had to go there to testify and help get our people through for the English Department—so I was on Barnard’s appointment promotion tenure—ATP—committee, and with Bob McCaughey, when he was Dean. But then, several times I was over there, and, yeah, the demands about publication—is he the best in America?—Which is a ridiculous thing to ask—Is she the best? In one case the Dean said to me, about—I think it was Jim Basker—Professor Basker—“Why does everybody seem to know him personally? Don’t we have any impersonal letters about him?” And at that point a wonderful woman, whose name I forget, in the French Department, who had written a biography of Madame Roland, said: “In 18th century studies everybody knows everybody.” Thank you, ma’am. So of course he got through and has become very distinguished. But it was the fear of Columbia, I think, that increased the Barnard stress on publication, and even the Barnard shrinkage of the teaching load so we can compete in hiring people.

E. Moye:

Okay. So in discussing with Peter Balsam, if you’ll just—Oh, look there’s James Basker’s anthology right there.

A. Prescott:

Yes, well he—this is his office.

E. Moye:
Right. That was very important to me in the course I took with him. [Laughs]

A. Prescott:

I’m very proud that I saw him through the tenure process.

E. Moye:

Yeah. Well, okay, sorry to diverge for a moment. In speaking with Professor Balsam—I would just like to share my own theory, I suppose, with you—he was a new professor, so he didn’t feel very much anxiety. I don’t think he truly understood the value of Barnard education at that point, and I think he now does. And what he expressed to me is that his opinion changed drastically over time, and that he now sees that going co-ed may have disadvantaged women in a way that he didn’t understand then. And then, I feel like there are two other levels of angst. The next one, and this is something that I also discussed with Peter Balsam, would be the professors who were becoming eligible for tenure and who were about to be tenured, who not only were going to be in fear of losing their jobs—if they had merged—but also were realizing, as Peter Balsam said, that they may have started in one school and wind up being tenured in a school that was completely different.

A. Prescott:

That’s a good point. Oh, I was thinking of something as you spoke. Remind me of your first point. I’m having a senior moment. [Laughs]

E. Moye:

Well, the point that they may have lost their jobs.

A. Prescott:

Oh, yes! I asked somebody, legally, if you have tenure at Barnard, how *can* they get rid of you—if you have tenure? And I was told: “Ahh, you’re forgetting some of the sneaky moves.” You dissolve the English Department—you see—and then you set up a Humanities Department. You see? Neat trick. And then you hire people, and then you can hire the people that you think may have some distinction, and you let the others go teach at East Podunk Junior College. You see? So there were legally ways that Columbia could have gotten rid of a bunch of us.

E. Moye:

So, then a lot of the anxiety, perhaps, had to do with, even for the tenured faculty members keeping their jobs.

A. Prescott:

Yes—keeping their jobs. And tenure wasn’t enough to protect you because there were ways of sneaking around that.

E. Moye:

Right. And then, would you say that the anxiety was the highest amongst the professors who were just becoming eligible for tenure or were just going—

A. Prescott:

No, I would say the anxiety and anger, and I remember some of the anger, was among those who had not—who would not meet—the qualifications for tenure, even if they were 60 years old and full professors, because they knew they were vulnerable— if the gorilla wanted to get rid of them, and maybe the gorilla would have wanted to. I was vulnerable at that point. My 20-years-later self would not have been vulnerable. But, if you’re a brilliant teacher but don’t have your Ph.D., if you’ve never actually published your dissertation although you’re a wonderful drama teacher—like the head of the department at one point, Ren Patterson, who had his office next door. He was a wonderful, wonderful guy. I adored him. I still use some of his notes every time I teach Shakespeare. But he just couldn’t get the dissertation into book, and he didn’t publish articles. Out—probably—not necessarily right away, not a guillotine, just a little sword in the back—you know. There should be a verb for contempt—scorn is the verb—to scorn somebody out. Now I think some of the fears were exaggerated, but they were at the time quite real. I mean people felt them subjectively; I know I did.

E. Moye:

Okay. Something that I’ve been really interested in—just based on the time period—the women’s movement. And whether that had an impact on the English Department’s perspective?

A. Prescott:

Yes. But some of the *women* in the department, especially—one of them was a very distinguished Renaissance scholar, whom I deeply admire—I’m her replacement, so to speak—now I’ve been replaced—but some of the *women*, especially, were vulnerable in terms of academic accomplishment and so on. But they were also conservative, and they didn’t resonate with the women’s movement as much as perhaps they should have. Some of them had resonated with it in earlier decades, but this was scary—and remember the radical movements at Columbia were not feminist. Do you remember, I think it was Mark Rudd: “What is the position of women in the movement?” And the reply: “Horizontal.” [Both scoff and laugh] Yeah I know. So the impact of the women’s movement, I think, comes just about this time or a little bit later and then had a huge impact. Except, I can say as a professor here, that the odd thing is that Barnard, because it’s all women, can be more relaxed. I can say things here, in class, I wouldn’t say if I were the only woman on campus at the University of Michigan, or something.

E. Moye:

Sure. Did you perceive any discomfort on the part of your students about the idea of merging?

A. Prescott:

You know, that’s a brilliant question, and I have to answer no.

E. Moye:

That’s what I’ve found in my research too.

A. Prescott:

So I’m not alone? I’m not just insensitive?

E. Moye:

No! There is an overwhelming understanding, on my part, that it did not phase them. That was not their concern, at that time especially. Their concern at that time was housing.

A. Prescott:

I did not know that. Though I knew it was “our” institutional concern because—I’m going to say something indiscreet here—I was told we were Harvard for the nation and Fordham for the city. That’s unfair to Fordham. But there were lots of good students who wouldn’t come because they didn’t want to live with mommy and daddy in Brooklyn or Manhattan.

E. Moye:

And, I mean while the students, I do think, had strong opinions about maintaining autonomy, there was no fear, they did not feel vulnerable.

A. Prescott:

I didn’t pick up any fear—no.

E. Moye:

And that actually leads me into my next question. So the students, first of all, they didn’t feel this fear. Professors like Peter Balsam, who were new, and not very involved with these decisions anyway, didn’t feel this fear. Do you think that people who were in higher positions, Ellen Futter, for example, as a member of the administration, or the Board of Trustees, hid their own feelings of fear?

A. Prescott:

They didn’t hide it very well. Ellen Futter was my student, too—gave her an “A”—[laughs] I knew that woman had a future. I remember the administration signaling concern, irritation, but not fear—whatever they actually felt—I mean the emotion of fear, I didn’t pick up. Concern, yes. And you mentioned the whole tenuring process—nowadays, that is another issue, but that’s a very serious one in our relationship with Columbia. Because we are very unusual—you have to go through tenure twice. Now that’s not a merger, but it’s scary.

E. Moye:

I think that Ellen Futter, publicly, made it seem as though she had total control over the situation.

A. Prescott:

I thought Ellen came in later. I’m feeling confused. Okay.

E. Moye:

Well Mattfeld was here until ’80.

A. Prescott:

Yes, that’s what I thought.

E. Moye
Yes. Mattfeld was here until ’80, but when she was pushed aside—

A. Prescott:

I know. We were lied to by the original university—as you’ve perhaps heard—

E. Moye:

Yes, and so she was a very controversial figure. And then Futter came in in ’80 as acting president, and then saw Barnard through the merger talks. So she was here for the most intense times, perhaps. And when she spoke about it publicly, in an interview that was introducing her to the Barnard alumnae and Barnard students—in the *Alumnae Magazine*—she said that she was going to continue the conversation with Columbia, and that she wanted to discuss how the relationship between Barnard and Columbia was going to continue changing, but that she was confident in Barnard and that she truly recognized the value of Barnard education.

A. Prescott:

I think that’s true. She had had a Barnard education.

E. Moye:

Sure. But I’m wondering if you think, if anyone in a position similar to hers, so anyone who had a degree of responsibility over this issue, was more concerned than perhaps they let on.

A. Prescott:

Of course! But if you’re the President of Barnard, you have to perform confidence, however you’re feeling inside. And she did that well. But if she wasn’t worried inside, then she wasn’t the woman I know. She’s intelligent. She would have known there was reason to worry. I remember being concerned, in some of the discussions, even on the library: what happens to our library? [Laughs]

E. Moye:

[Laughs] What happens our library now?

A. Prescott:

Oh, don’t get me going. But, for example, if Columbia played tough and said: “Alright, we’re going to take women; we don’t need you. You’re cut off.” Our library wasn’t big enough. You see—if we had to pay fees to get to Butler—our library isn’t big enough to be a real academic library. So there was also the fear, not of merger, but of being expelled from Columbia. So there’s the opposite fear: Can we go it alone?

E. Moye:

And what did you think?

A. Prescott:
What I was worried about was the Barnard library, which isn’t big enough for full senior thesis, say. It’s still true. When I was here as a student, the Barnard library was the third floor of Barnard Hall—just a couple of big rooms. You should have been it then. So we would have gone on using Butler, but we would have had to pay money. So divorcing us was also an anxiety—

raping us or divorcing us. [Laughs]

E. Moye:

[Laughs] Neither is a great option.

A. Prescott:

No, no. It turned out well—very well, I think. And then, when Columbia took women, amazingly, we survived.

E. Moye:

Do you have any theories on why we survived?

A. Prescott:

When I was young, I went to a co-ed boarding school, which was thought to be in advance, you know. But the research recently has shown that actually having all girls or all boys can actually be better—intellectually. And I remember, at Harvard, that if you raised your hand you might be the only girl—as we said in those days—hand up. The others were sitting like virtuous girls. And so, I think, that a number of young women understand that maybe the day will never come—it isn’t a question of equality; it’s a question of psychology and mental make-up—that women together gives you more opportunity to be yourself and say things. And the same thing [laughs] may be true of young men, but it’s certainly true of young women. You can be braver here. I think that’s true.

E. Moye:

I think that’s true.

A. Prescott:

But I don’t know if it will be true forever. That’s what I don’t know. Is this residual from past sexism? Or is there something about the genders’—sexes’—make-up that makes a one-sex thing better, in some regards, at least for 18-22.

E. Moye:

Peter Balsam also spoke about that, and even though he wasn’t so concerned with the merger at that point, I think, in looking back, he’s realized that a co-ed classroom, in many ways, can make the woman in the classroom feel inferior.

A. Prescott:

Yes. My Shakespeare course has several men in it, but they’re so outnumbered that they behave themselves and don’t try to take over.

E. Moye:
I was just hearing a story about this, which was that there was a class that only had one man in it, but he was very outspoken, and in no way was trying to take over the course, but raised his hand all the time and was always called on. This was a course taught by Timea Szell. And one day he was sick, and the women in the course suddenly brought this new life—brought this new light—to the course. And she said to them: “What’s wrong with you guys? Why aren’t you doing this when he’s here?” And it amazed me—the truth in that.

A. Prescott:

Yes. I’m very unusual. I took a course when I was at Harvard—I was the only girl—as we said—in the course. My hand was always up. [Laughs] But even so, I’ve noticed teaching that this can be true, and I would love to know—since we know that women are just as intelligent as men; we know that—is this hormones? Is it residual—as I said—sexism? What the hell is going on? And I have no idea whether it’s something in nature or in nurture. No idea. I do know there’s magic here at Barnard.

E. Moye:

Sure. So it’s fair to say, then, that you saw the value in Barnard remaining autonomous?

A. Prescott:

I see it more now than I did at the time. At the time, I didn’t care. If we could not lose people, I thought it kind of might be exciting to be merged. I was worried about my senior colleagues who might be legally gotten rid of. I would be more upset now than I was then.

E. Moye:

But still you felt the fear of losing your—

A. Prescott:

I felt the fear of losing my job—and of being overwhelmed. And I hadn’t yet begun my Columbia career, you see. But, looking back, I’m glad we didn’t merge. I have come to value women’s college more as I’ve gotten older—much as I love men. [Laughs] And I’ve had—teaching at Columbia—I’ve had any number of male students, but it was in the grad school, and I think my feelings about Barnard’s being all women wouldn’t apply to grad school. Something happens after 22, 23: the men learn to shut up,;women learn to be more aggressive. I don’t know what it is. But at grad school it didn’t bother me.

E. Moye:

And what did you think the feeling from your department was? Was it mostly fear of losing jobs, or was it a real dedication to remain true to Barnard’s mission?

A. Prescott:

I think it was the latter, officially, on the outside, but with some of the fear on the inside. I don’t mean that the outside part wasn’t true. I think it was dedication to Barnard’s mission, in ways that I did not fully understand at the time, but it was accompanied by fear. So it was both. And I think I didn’t fully understand the mission part, in ways that I should have. I just thought it might be exciting to be with the boys—the big boys—the big time.

E. Moye:

As long as you—

A. Prescott:

Didn’t get fired. I was wrong.

E. Moye:

But I think that’s an interesting perspective. And one that I’m sure today wouldn’t be so openly discussed.

A. Prescott:

No. I was still—I became an assistant professor in ’68—first job at Columbia, first year being an assistant professor—so I had not had fully time, I think, to develop the wisdom [laughs] to see that we do have a mission.

E. Moye:

But because you had been here a little longer than some professors you did perceive more fully the threat that was being imposed?

A. Prescott:

Oh, yes. I was just becoming an associate professor at that point, and my first book came out in 1978, and I was frantically writing articles so I could get tenure. But I was also on the brink of teaching at Columbia and loving a lot of the people over there, but also noticing the difference and the residual sexism. A fellow grad student of mine in—oh, this would have been 1966 or something—told me she had told her professor she had a job teaching a section of Lit-Hum; he looked at her and said, “My God,” turned on his heel, and walked away—because she was female. So some of that persisted. People like that got over it in a few years.

E. Moye:

[Both laugh] I hope! So I’m also interested to know if you had any connection to, or relationship with, anyone on the Board. Or if you felt that the Board’s perspective on the issue was clear to you?

A. Prescott:

It was not clear. I had no perspective on it. I didn’t know people on the Board. I’ve since come to, every now and then, to know somebody. They were invisible to me.

E. Moye:

I think they felt the same—I certainly think they felt the same fear, and I think they also felt the same desire to remain autonomous. But I am curious about why their perspective wasn’t understood.

A. Prescott:

At faculty meetings, we may have been told what it was, and I simply don’t remember. But the Board is not as close to the Barnard faculty as it might be—then or now—to be frank. So you felt a sense of distance. I don’t know quite how to put it, but every now and then you get a report at a faculty meeting, but it wasn’t personal—there was no warmth or coziness there. I say that hesitantly because I’ve known some of the people on it, and they’re good people.

E. Moye:

I would love it if you would discuss a little bit more the after-effects of the decision that came to be.

A. Prescott:

I think relief—a lot of relief—but, as time went on, an increased desire on the part of the Barnard English Department—I don’t know about the other departments, but I think this was true everywhere—to say (I’m going to put it in down-to-earth talk), “Okay, you bastards, [laughs] who tried to absorb us—you big gorilla—we’re going to show you that we are so damn good at our job *and* distinguished as scholars that you can stop thinking you can just sideline us.” So that corresponded with an increased desire here at Barnard—which had begun a little earlier, but it, I think, accelerated it—to make sure people don’t get tenure without having published and having some distinction. And Bob McCaughey once said at a meeting of the tenure committee: “Oh, yes, the letters are favorable, but the letterhead element isn’t very good.” In other words, she’s not getting recommendations from top universities and colleges. There was a reason he was wrong in this particular case. [Laughs] But I think that it did accelerate this move toward saying: “Yes, your dissertation is wonderful. You’ve got three more years. Get the book out. And do a couple of articles, go to some academic meetings, and, oh, by the way, be a great teacher.”

E. Moye:
There is so much that students do not perceive.

A. Prescott:

Of course. Of course. But you know about it.

E. Moye:

I’m always on the side of the teacher. [Both laugh] In the third grade, when someone’s saying, “This is so unfair; I can’t believe I got in trouble,” I was saying: “No, I think they’re right.” [Both laugh]

A. Prescott:

That’s funny!

E. Moye:

Clearly I had a teacher at home.

A. Prescott:

But another big shift has been—two things—toward being more understanding about women having babies, and also men getting a little time off, though we discovered some years ago that, when men get paternity leave, they write another book; when women get maternity leave, they might be able to do an article, but they’re also nursing. [Laughs] You see. But, in some ways this has been sad, because the teachers we had who weren’t publishing were absolutely wonderful human beings and teachers, and I owe them more than I could ever express. But they would not have gotten tenure now. And that’s a tragedy. Stephen Greenblatt, who’s a famous Shakespeare scholar—and I mean he’s published in the general world too—sent a letter to everyone in the MLA—Modern Language Assocation—saying, “This is crazy.” He was president of it. “This is nuts: to demand one book for tenure, another book for promotion. We have too many academic books; we’re drowning in academic articles.” (And he was teaching at Harvard.) Until Harvard pulls back, and Columbia, and Yale, the craziness is going to go on. And we’re now just as crazy as Columbia.

E. Moye:

Can you speak to any other departments’ perspectives on this?

A. Prescott:

I wish I could, but I really only know the English Department’s. I’m sorry.

E. Moye:

Okay. No, that’s fine. I’m just curious, because it seems that some departments at Barnard had much better relationships with their Columbia counterparts.

A. Prescott:

Oh, yes. And there’s a reason for this. Well, as I’ve said, our closeness to Columbia is like this: close, distant, close, distant, and I lived through several phases. At the moment, it’s fairly distant. But when I teach over there—or taught over there—everything’s fine. People are very chummy, but I don’t think our Chair regularly goes to their departmental meetings, and I did when I was Chair. So we’re in a more distant phase—but friendly and mutual respect. Second point, if you have a department which has enough people so it can cover the entire thing—we don’t need Columbia in this department; we cover it—from Anglo-Saxon to right now. Same thing at Columbia. But if you’re a Physics Department, then you need Columbia, you see. So the smaller, or more specialized, departments have to have closeness to Columbia, because they’re not complete in themselves. We are—which is good and bad.

E. Moye:

And that totally confirms what Peter Balsam said, because he said that Psychology is somewhere right in the middle.

A. Prescott:
Yes, that makes perfect sense. When my granddaughter applied here, because she wants to go to med-school, she discovered that, yes, you have the advantage of having some Columbia labs and so on and the advantage of being a Barnard woman. But, in English, we can each say the hell with the other one. That’s sad, and some of us do teach over there. For some reason, they don’t teach over here. Since around 1962, when I was still grading papers, we had somebody who taught in both places, but based there. But I haven’t seen it since, and I don’t know why. If I were Chair, I would seriously consider an exchange. It’s partly that when we teach over there we teach in the grad school.

E. Moye:

Why is that?

A. Prescott:

Don’t poison their mind? [Both laugh] I really don’t know. I think we come cheap compared to hiring another person. And maybe it’s going to go down now that we have a two-two [teaching load]. And that’s another problem: in order to compete, so you can publish more, you teach two courses/two courses. I grew up here teaching three and three. This means you have to hire more people or offer fewer courses. If you hire more people tuition goes up. You see? And I have a friend—brilliant guy—taught him at Columbia grad school—saw him just at this conference I was at—he teaches four and four. How the hell is he going to publish the book that will make him hirable by a more prestigious place? Ours is a lunatic profession. You know that. [Laughs]

E. Moye:

I would certainly agree with that. [Laughs] And at a school like Barnard, we don’t have the same teaching assistants—we don’t have the same—

A. Prescott:

Well, you can get them. I have one for Shakespeare. You have to have a certain number of students to get one. Columbia now funds its doctoral candidates so well that you can’t bribe them anymore. M.A. students are bribable, but you don’t want one because you want somebody who’s further along. And we used to get grad students cheap.

E. Moye:

[Laughs] Like my dad.

A. Prescott:

Yes! [Laughs] Exactly. And so, if you wanted a T.A., they were hungry. But they’re less hungry nowadays.

E. Moye:
And, I’m also interested, because I’m a Barnard student, and I don’t take any classes at Columbia. I used to, when I first started.

A. Prescott:

English major?

E. Moye:

English major, History minor.

A. Prescott:

But we have a complete major.

E. Moye:

I’ve taken one English course at Columbia. It was Amatory Fiction with Nicole Horejsi. So we read *Pamela* and that kind of stuff.

A. Prescott:

Sounds like fun. I used to know everybody over there, but not anymore.

E. Moye:

So I found it to be interesting, but I don’t think I would take another—I mean I’m a senior, so I don’t have an option—but—

A. Prescott:

Well they have some good people over there. I mean, of course, it’s Columbia—a great university. But I think we’re pretty wonderful too. The prejudice at Columbia has not disappeared. And I can’t resist telling you: we had the then-Chair over—a nice guy; you know we’re “kiss, kiss, hug” when we meet—and he’s now left Columbia; he got bribed—he said at lunch, and I wanted to slug him: “I know that you at Barnard… Your faculty are on a…” And he thought for a little bit, how to phrase this without hurting people’s feelings. “You’re on a—wonderful teachers—on—professionally on a different trajectory.” I thought to myself: I have published as much as anybody over in that blankety-blank university. I’ve been President of the Donne Society, President of the Spencer Society, President of the 16th-Century Society. I am not on a different trajectory—which is a nice way of saying we know you’re not as scholarly. And it’s not true. And I love the guy—and I haven’t actually slugged him. [Laughs]

E. Moye:

[Laughs] Well, good for you! [Both laugh] I think students don’t perceive that faculty may feel that prejudice, but I think that students feel that prejudice constantly.

A. Prescott:

Oh, yes. And a few years ago, the blog scene went wild.

E. Moye:

With Obama?

A. Prescott:

No, this was Barnard-Columbia relations. I forget what the topic was, but it devolved into Barnard Columbia—it could have been the Obama thing—with some of the guys saying that Barnard is the back-door to Columbia. And an “A” at Barnard is a “C” at Columbia. Or maybe an “A” there is a “B” here.

E. Moye:

Then how do we take the same classes that they do and get the same grades?

A. Prescott:

No, it’s utterly false! Utterly. But it is some people’s perception, and it’s very irritating.

E. Moye:

Certainly!

A. Prescott:

Yeah! One wonderful thing about going to Barnard is that you have such terrific students. It’s one reason why I’m pushing 80 and still teaching here—not 80 yet; it’s that in later life they turn up again. And, so I went to see a new eye doctor, and she looked up from taking my information and said: “But I know you!” She said: “I took your course on Fable and Fantasy!” [Both laugh] So Barnard women are just wonderful. My Columbia grad students are too—I see them every conference I go to. I think we populate the academic world. But the way Barnard women turn up later—let’s have a drink, you know—and doing all sorts of wonderful things.

E. Moye:

Well I think that’s a wonderful place to end, actually.

A. Prescott:

Yes. Thank you!