

# Learning in a New Light

Syracuse's first Faculty Fellow makes scholarship the center of attention.

by Carol North Schmuckler

When Amelia Van Vleck arrived in Syracuse this August to begin three years of residence, all she had with her was one small suitcase and a tote bag; the rest of her things didn't catch up with her for more than a month. But it really didn't matter very much. Van Vleck carries her most important baggage in her head.

A scholar of medieval French literature, Van Vleck is the first person named to a Syracuse University Faculty Fellowship—more popularly known as a “junior chair”—in the College of Arts and Sciences. That puts a special kind of pressure on her: She must not only make a significant contribution to academic research, but her achievements will certainly set a standard by which later fellows will be measured.

Diminutive and soft-spoken, Van Vleck looks rather frail to carry that responsibility, but fortunately her ability is inversely proportionate to her size. Her selection over 200 other applicants was spurred by her highly regarded dissertation on Provençal troubadour poetry, a reputation for prodigious scholarship, and her unquestioned ability to bring a unique level of intellectual activity to campus.

Unlike other SU faculty members, Van Vleck's primary function is not to teach—she teaches only one undergraduate course each semester—but to carry on significant scholarly research. In the process, she will inevitably have a profound effect on both students and fellow faculty members.

The Winifred Seely Myers Love Faculty Fellowship in Foreign Languages and Literatures that Van Vleck received is one of five similar fellowships designed to bring some of the nation's outstanding young scholars to Syracuse for three-year faculty appointments. All are contained in the College of Arts and Sciences' current \$4-million endowment campaign, launched in

response to a \$975,000 challenge grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH).

“The endowment by Mrs. Love guarantees, in perpetuity, that every three years we will bring into the department an infusion of young talent and new ideas,” says Louis Roberts, chair of the foreign languages and literatures department. “The person holding the fellowship will interact with students and faculty and become a source of stimulation for all concerned.”

Van Vleck herself has a clear vision of her role at Syracuse as well as of the scholar's role in society. “What scholars must do is go out to the distant knowledge and bring it back for everyone,” she explains. “It's up to them to keep areas of knowledge alive and not let them stagnate. There have been periods when the body of knowledge was left to atrophy and was taught by rote. But the results were disastrous. We need to keep alive the spirit of exploration and the possibility of having an original idea.”

It is her task as a researcher, she believes, to show students that they can still discover something new or uncover a truth that's been overlooked. “Each generation has to reinterpret history,” she says. “Scholars in our era can look at another century and find that some assumption made then clouded the way people read literature or traced history.

“For instance, take the assumption that the earth is flat. That ‘fact’ was taught for years, and it colored what people thought about events of the time. But once they found out the world was round, they had to come up with another explanation for the ships that supposedly fell off the edge of the earth. It takes an original thinker to get rid of old ideas that aren't working and to postulate new models. You must become very creative and use imagination, logic, and reasoning.”

Van Vleck will bring that kind of

creative thinking to her students both by her example and through classroom work. This semester she is teaching an intensive seminar on Plato's *Apology* (in classical Greek, her second foreign language), and next semester she will teach a class on how to write individual research papers in her French literature class.

“The skills students will learn in those classes are valuable in any career, not just in the academic world,” she explains. “The primary thing they'll develop is the ability to analyze an argument, which in itself is incredibly useful. In the Plato course we study how an argument is put together and watch Socrates parting the veils of illusion in political speeches. At this stage of their lives, students can use these critical skills to write research papers, but later they'll have the ability to interpret any kind of data and come up with original ideas of their own.”

If you saw Van Vleck on campus, you'd take her for a student. Casually dressed and unassuming, she appears considerably younger than her 33 years. But she's had no trouble gaining the respect of her students. One class session is all it takes to reveal her considerable intellect.

Her abilities as a researcher/scholar developed at the University of California at Berkeley, where she received all three of her degrees. There she became interested in French medieval poetry. “I've always been attracted to the beginnings of literature in a given culture—I like things that are just forming,” she explains.

As she started exploring the period, she found herself particularly interested in twelfth-century troubadour poetry, which she says breaks all the rules of literature as we know it.

“Our current definitions of poetry just don't hold. For one thing, we expect poetry to have

every word in its proper place. No one tampers with it, we don't change the punctuation, and we certainly don't take the second stanza and put it at the end! But that's just what troubadour poetry does.”

She goes on to explain that the form the poetry took depended on who happened to sing it at a particular time—the texts were anything but fixed. “That runs counter to our notions of a poem as this inviolable, static thing. These works move, or at least the lyrics do.” It was only when a poem was written down that it took on a concrete form—and then there were as many versions as there were editors.

Van Vleck is amused by the suggestion that the subject of troubadour poetry is rather specialized, pointing out that all knowledge is specific. “It's only by investigating the details that we move knowledge forward. And this is a particularly interesting field if you're concerned with the media in general. It's a clear example of how a work of literate art takes its form and is disseminated.”

She also sees correlations with the modern world. “There is real interest today in the performer and the performance. The modern counterpart would be a singer who performs from memory rather than from a written text and who modifies the songs with each performance. The person who comes to my mind is Bob Dylan.”

When she was growing up in California's Silicon Valley and then Idaho, Van Vleck had little thought of becoming a scholar. Her father, now retired, worked on NASA projects, including a communications satellite. “He tried to teach me calculus when I was quite young and was always drawing diagrams of how things worked. I'm afraid it backfired,” she laughs.

It was during her first two years of college at the University of Puget Sound in Tacoma, Wash., that she





*Amelia Van Vleck is the first Winifred Seely Myers Love Faculty Fellow.*

became interested in foreign languages. She later transferred to Berkeley to take advantage of its extensive medieval section.

After receiving her doctorate in 1982, Van Vleck served as assistant to the editor of *Romance Philology*, a scholarly journal on linguistics and medieval literature in the Romance languages, while she con-

tinued to search for just the kind of academic position that emphasized research and writing.

"The first thing one wants to do after receiving a Ph.D. and writing a dissertation is to continue writing on another project while teaching. Unfortunately, it's very difficult to get into a position where you can do that," she says ruefully.

"What usually happens is that new faculty members are overloaded with teaching and committee duties, so they don't have time to produce any more original research. It's a sort of built-in self-destruct in the academic profession, and it's very sad."

Securing the SU position allows Van Vleck to follow a different path.

She has already plunged into research for her next major project, spending much of her day in Syracuse's well-stocked Bird Library.

"I plan to look at a different body of literature from the one I examined in my dissertation—the Old French lyric, which is in a completely different language and a different branch of the tradition. One subject that's particularly intriguing is the question of how you establish a working text, given the way medieval works are transmitted with many different versions. It's a strange mixture of the most abstract literary theory and the most painstaking old-fashioned philology."

For Van Vleck, the frosting on the cake will come when she actually begins writing the new book. "One thing that makes it possible for me to pursue this rather solitary activity that takes place in my mind is finally writing about it. I'm committed to making what I learn in private accessible to other people. It wouldn't mean anything if I did it just for my own benefit. The writing makes it all worthwhile."

Van Vleck's formal introduction to her colleagues came in late September at a public presentation of her past research and future plans. Virtually the entire faculty of the foreign languages and literatures department was there, along with the donor of the fellowship, Winifred Seely Myers Love.

The listeners took chairs around the periphery of the room, leaving Van Vleck alone at the head of a massive conference table. It didn't bother her a bit. From her first word, she was totally in command, going from a simply expressed explanation of her thesis into detailed examples.

When she was through, the questions started. One professor asked for clarification on a specific point. Another offered parallels to literary traditions in his own discipline (Spanish), and a third jumped in to defend Van Vleck's interpretations. Within minutes, there was a polite but decidedly lively academic discussion going on, while Van Vleck sat at the table, smiling quietly. Obviously her presence was doing just what it was supposed to do.

All the luggage Amelia Van Vleck would need for the next three years had clearly arrived.