

# Katrina Trask: The Gilded Age of Philanthropy

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Katrina Trask (1853-1922) is best known for founding—both financially and idealistically—Yaddo, the artist retreat located in Saratoga Springs, New York. Spencer and Katrina Trask’s sense of service and philanthropy was informed by her love for Arthurian legends and the medieval notion of patronage, wherein the wealthy fund and support artists and writers. Trask devoted her life to serving, so much so that her own literary career has become a footnote to her charity. She began her writing career after the loss of her four young children, and over the span of her lifetime wrote essays, plays, poetry, and novels—in addition to being a prolific chronicler of events. Historical and scholarly attention on Trask should be extended beyond references to her wealth to include her literary accomplishments, not as a mere footnote but rather as an independent aspect of her life worthy of its own critical attention. In this essay, I argue that the legends of King Arthur and Faust and the ethics associated therewith directly inform Katrina Trask’s literary works and the larger notion of service throughout her lifetime.

**Keywords:** philanthropy, American women writers, Arthurian legends, Faustian influence, Gilded Age New York

## *Yaddo*

*Its only ghosts are memories of pleasure  
Which never shall depart;  
The secret of the place is a hid treasure,  
In the Queen’s heart.*

—Henry Van Dyke, on a scrap of paper left on the library desk at the Yaddo estate.  
Included in Trask’s *Yaddo*, 1923, p. 4.

Saratoga Springs, New York, has been lauded as a special and unique place in the world. Native tribes respected it as a sacred location of renewal and health, and in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, its numerous springs resulted in a resort town unlike any other in the United States. With the addition of the infamous Saratoga Race-track, Canfield Casino, and other gambling houses in the 1840s, Saratoga Springs became a favorite summertime destination for many, particularly wealthy families. Even today, the horses still race, the mineral baths still offer health and relaxation, and history is alive through museums, tours, foundations, and many historical landmarks, resulting in the city's slogan: "Health, History, Horses."

Spencer and Katrina Trask, a wealthy married couple from Brooklyn, New York, visited the city in the 1880s and summered in a run-down farmhouse that they eventually purchased, a decision that many of their friends and family thought poorly made: "When we bought Yaddo we were considered by all ... as having taken leave of our senses" (Trask, *Yaddo* 14). Though they eventually founded the famous Yaddo as a family retreat in the 1880s, they tragically lost all four of their beloved children over a short space of time. Without a large family to fill the estate, Katrina Trask made the decision to dedicate Yaddo as an artists' colony, a move she confirmed in her will, and it successfully launched as such in 1926. The Trasks' wealth eventually subsidized and supported much of Saratoga Springs' cultural development even far beyond their lifetimes. Though many scholars, artists, and visitors to Saratoga are familiar with Yaddo and the Trasks' financial support of the city they loved, fewer are familiar with the woman writer and philanthropist behind its inception: Katrina Trask.

Historians have a great wealth of materials upon which to base their studies of the Trask family, though most of these are not well-suited to literary scholars interested in Katrina Trask's literary opus. Vast historical archives exist in the Saratoga Springs and New York City Public Libraries, and a few of the records in these have even been digitized for online use. That said, there exist some reviews of Katrina Trask's literary works when they were first published, but to date, no thorough literary study has been conducted of Trask's work. In fact, to obtain copies of her texts is an adventure in and of itself, with some being available only as poorly constructed re-prints, while the extant copies of others, if they can be found at all, tend to be locked away in glass cases. In addition, the singular, most well-researched text on Katrina Trask, *The World of Katrina Trask, Lady of Yaddo*, a 1995 manuscript by Anne Key Simpson, is unpublished and currently held by the Saratoga Springs Public Library. This library maintains one of the only known hard copies of this text in its non-circulating collection, which also includes original editions of Trask's works.

Overall, Trask's writing received mixed reviews during her lifetime and has long since faded into the background of American literature. Trask's writing was frequently dismissed as sentimental and idealistic, and reviewers noted that "Mrs. Trask has never had to conquer poverty, neglect, lack of sympathy, or a moment of that sad, unrecognized spirituality, the lot of so many highly-gifted women" (Sherwood 311). And yet, those same critics lauded the spirituality, philosophy, and ethics found in her work. Of her many publications, three of them garnered greater notice from readers and critics: *Under King Constantine* (1892), *John Leighton Jr.* (1898), and *In the Vanguard* (1913). At the time of writing this essay, *John Leighton Jr.* has proven exceedingly difficult to obtain due to being out of print for over a century. A single hard copy can be found in a locked glass case in the Saratoga Springs Public Library; no digital copy is available. The text in particular deserves closer attention, to be done for future study with the library's support.

In the other two works listed above, Trask shows a continued devotion to service and duty, themes that she connected to Arthurian legends. Frequently, "she places her characters in an atmosphere of medieval pageantry and chivalry," an atmosphere that permeates Trask's own life, from her writing to the design of her home and gardens to the development of her own idealism and philosophies (Simpson 207). Trask seems to have set out with a mission to create a medieval myth of her own life, and she was quite successful in doing so. In *Under King Constantine*, three narrative poems are set in the time period immediately following the death of King Arthur. Each of the poems focuses on the tale of a different knight, Sir Sanpeur, Sir Kathanal, and Sir Christalan, each of whom successfully faces spiritual challenges to his honor and devotion. In *In the Vanguard*, the protagonist, Elsa, forms a pacifistic outlook on war as the Revolutionary War begins, and soon, her beloved, Phillip, returns from fighting in the war after experiencing his own crisis of conscience. He, however, is accused of cowardice for abandoning his post, and their community begins to reject and shame him. Elsa is undaunted and reassures him of her love. They find resolve and peace together once they firmly establish their own beliefs.

Both works received positive reviews during Trask's lifetime; *In the Vanguard* became one of her more widely circulated texts. After Trask's death, however, mention of her literary works and endeavors becomes almost nonexistent. And yet, as Hédi Jaouad contends, "the only other female writer of Katrina's generation who bears comparison to her would be Edith Wharton ... but unlike Wharton's, Katrina's work, which was well received during her lifetime, was totally neglected and forgotten after her death" (184). Trask's writing deserves to be studied, and not merely be a footnote to her financial status. In her roles as writer, philosopher,

and philanthropist, Katrina Trask employs her own version of European philosophies and ideals—particularly Arthurian and Faustian—and adds a feminine twist wherein it is the role of the divine female to serve as a guide to those around her and, when challenged, to defend her ethical positions.

## Biography

Kate Nichols was born wealthy and married into even more wealth. Living during New York's infamous Gilded Age, her life should have been one of unparalleled comforts, and that is certainly how her young life and early days of marriage began. She married Spencer Trask, a banker and financier, in 1874, and by all accounts the marriage was a happy one. The Trasks enjoyed a robust social life, and their fêtes and gatherings became major social events, drawing guests from all over the world.

Through tragic events, however, they lost each of their four children in childhood: Alanson died at age 4, in 1880; Christina died at age 11, and Spencer Junior died at age 5, each in 1888; and infant Katrina died at just 10 days old in 1889. To add to their mother's grief, Christina and Spencer Junior died after contracting an illness from their mother; Katrina was presumed to be on her deathbed and noncontagious, and the children were permitted to tell her goodbye. In a rapid reversal, the children were quickly taken by the fever, and when she finally awoke, she learned that both of her children had died. During this period of extreme grief, she began writing, but she put the works away for several years until Spencer urged her to revisit and publish what would become *Under King Constantine*. To help his wife heal, Spencer arranged for them to travel in Europe, where they spent a great deal of time in England and Italy.

After their return from Europe, Spencer and Katrina split their time between the home in Saratoga Springs and their residence in Brooklyn, New York, where they were living when Spencer himself came down with a severe fever. During his illness, the Saratoga home burned to the ground, but even before recovering from his fever, he gave the order for new architectural drawings to be done. Quickly, the new home was built: a country-style Victorian with heavy influences of "Italian Renaissance, Gothic, and Moorish touches" (Simpson 44). The European influences went far beyond the design of their home and gardens; as Mrs. M. E. W. Sherwood notes in an 1898 article in the *New York Times*, "One feels that Venice was the birthplace of this rare woman" (qtd. in Simpson 61).

The period after her children died and during the rebuilding of their home was Katrina Trask's most intellectual time. Spencer seemed to dote upon his wife, orchestrating elaborate parties, even crowning her at one of these, declaring her to be Regina Katrina, Queen of Yaddo; this mock coronation played into their idealized mythos of an Arthurian-styled court over which they themselves ruled (Simpson 38–39). This is also the source of the name she would take on publicly: Katrina Trask. Their marriage lasted until Spencer's death in 1909, when he was killed in a tragic train accident. Throughout her life, Trask experienced severe migraines, even to the point of permanently losing vision in her right eye. By the 1910s, she was an invalid who relied upon her servants for care and she rarely left her home at Yaddo. In 1921, she remarried their longtime family friend and Spencer's business partner, George Foster Peabody, before succumbing to bronchial pneumonia just one year later in 1922 (Simpson 110–17).

### **Serving the Home and Community**

Much is made of the philanthropy or service of wealthy patrons to help support this or that organization; and yet, there exists a distinction between the two terms—a nuanced difference of which Trask was clearly aware. In layman's terms, “philanthropy” describes the financial support given to a cause, while “service,” as developed below, connotes a deeper connection to and effort for that cause, and Trask herself notes the difference in her posthumously published *Yaddo* (1923). Her thoughts of philanthropy and service are clear: “But at heart I am, and ever have been, a social Socialist” (93). By this, Trask means that her political leanings are in alignment with social reform and support, and she disagrees strongly with the sort of “philanthropists” who are disconnected from their notions of service in their day-to-day lives, for example mistreating servants.

She shares a tale of a “virtuous and lovely” woman who visited her while Trask travelled in England. The woman, who Trask states was well-known for her philanthropy, made her elderly coachmen wait in the bitter cold weather, “whilst she was urging me to lead a better life, to burn my books of poetry and philosophy and to pray long and frequent prayers for my household to convert them from Roman Catholicism” (96). Trask found actions such as this—feigning social concern or donating vast sums of wealth but still mistreating the very people false philanthropists purport to assist—hypocritical and refused to operate in a similar fashion. Simpson quotes Trask as having stated that “To treat any creature who

has the same soul, the same sensibilities, and the same potentialities that we have as though they are a class apart, is ... to fail utterly in one's privileges and responsibilities" (Simpson 46–47). And yet, I must continue to use the description of Trask as "philanthropist," for lack of a better or more accurate term.

In examining her world and identifying the ways in which she could enact service, we find that Katrina's first realm was the domestic. Trask was noted for being kind and welcoming to those who served and lived in her home: "Servants should have individual rooms, and a common sitting and dining room other than the kitchen, if possible" (Simpson 47). In reflecting on her beliefs, she writes in *Yaddo*, "My first desire has always been to change the meaning of the word *servant* from something lowly to something lofty. It is one of the sad commentaries upon our unchristian habit of class distinction" (95). And for the most part, according to interviews, observations, and the reports of the servants themselves as noted in Simpson's biography, she was successful. In addition to providing a welcoming home and dedicating exclusive spaces for her servants, Trask held a monthly non-religious "Character Building Class" for them, and "she considered domestic service as important a profession as any other" (Simpson 48). The turnover rate of servants on the Yaddo estate was quite low, with many staying for decades, and some staying for the duration of their lives, some even caring for Trask in her final years.

For the duration of Trask's life, Yaddo served as a welcoming, inspirational retreat that she felt it was her duty to provide for the world around her, and "the mansion became a Mecca for literary people and artists who were attracted not only by the Trasks' warmth but to the concerts, lectures, and masques presented there" (Simpson 43). The Trasks hosted artists, writers, poets, politicians, financiers, philosophers, and clergy. They even regularly held feasts at Yaddo for the local homeless populations and the children living in nearby orphanages and hospitals, many of which they themselves funded. These charities included St. Faith's School (for children of lower income families) and St. Christina's Home Industrial School (where girls of lower income or who had physical disabilities were educated for entry into domestic service, in the hopes that they would be able to financially support themselves).

Trask welcomed anyone to her home who might take inspiration from the estate, its gardens, or the surrounding mountains and lakes, as well as those from whom she might herself learn or be inspired. She especially welcomed conversations regarding philosophy. She spent some time with the Republican politician James G. Blaine and "from him she learned self-discipline in continu-

ing her study of Socrates, Plato, Marcus Aurelius, Epictetus, and other philosophers”, and she dedicated herself to these studies as “she had become too analytical to accept the Bible’s teachings without question” (Simpson 63). She held true to the beliefs that she formed from her own studies and became an open and outspoken pacifist. In an oft-relayed anecdote, one guest insulted her for this and told her she should be shot for her pacifism. Her alleged response was, “rather facetiously, to let her wait for this until after coffee” (Simpson 65–66). As Trask more deeply formed her ethical outlook on life, so too did she gain the confidence to defend it.

Katrina Trask was not alone in her sense of duty, but she admits that her husband Spencer’s main focus centered more on the development of their finances as well as sculpting what he saw as a more progressive community. Spencer Trask’s life-long challenge was to expel the gambling circles in Saratoga Springs in favor of creating a bath town like those the Trasks had visited in Europe. Spencer routinely received death threats as he pursued legal maneuvers to run the casinos out of town, and the Trasks’ coachman, Thomas, began carrying a revolver for fear of being attacked (Trask, *Yaddo* 132). At one point, Katrina and Spencer dressed in lower class garb and rode out in a hired coach, one much plainer than their own, in order to hide their true identities as they delivered leaflets door to door contesting gambling at Canfield Casino and the Saratoga Springs Racetrack (Trask, *Yaddo* 130). Trask found the adventure thrilling but frightening: “It was nearly day-break when we were once more within the Yaddo gates and could draw, once more, a free and comfortable breath” (135).

### ***Under King Constantine***

With so much historical emphasis on her philanthropic and service endeavors, and on the development of Yaddo, very little attention has been given to Trask’s actual writing, which developed alongside her other accomplishments. *Under King Constantine* is the collection of poetry Trask composed during her time of deep grief. In 1894, Mrs. John Sherwood wrote of the text in *The American Woman*: “And who is this new poet, endowed with such great gifts?” (311), while C.E.L., a reviewer for *The Interior*, reported in 1898, “The poems were so exquisite they must needs be talked about, and loaned, and returned with the marks of many fingers on the fair white pages and even the blot of tears on some” (696). The collection was originally published without her name due to Katrina’s fear of negative reviews, but after the success of this initial venture, she added her name to subsequent editions, in the first public use of the name “Katrina Trask” (Simpson 214).

The collection includes three narrative poems, “Sanpeur”, “Kathanal”, and “Christalan”, and is set in a mythological time immediately following King Arthur’s reign under the new king, King Constantine. The first two poems tell a story of a romantic triangle, similar to that of King Arthur, Sir Lancelot, and Queen Guinevere. Both “Sanpeur” and “Kathanal” relay the story of a woman, who states her love for a knight (though she is married) but eventually returns to her husband’s side, having found peace, strength, and love.

In the case of “Sanpeur,” Gwendolaine (no mistaking the Arthurian connection here) has been physically abused by her husband, Sir Torm. In this poem, the Lady Gwendolaine is haughty and flirtatious with Sanpeur, but her affections are not outwardly returned. Instead, Sir Sanpeur, the knight, calls out her “inappropriate” behavior:

One day, at court, her restless spirits rose  
To a defiant mood and recklessness, [...]  
With laugh-begetting words made quick assent  
To the unworthy wit.  
She had scarce spoken,  
Ere Sanpeur raised his penetrating eyes,—  
The only ones, in all that laughing group  
Which were not bright with an approving smile. (12)

Gwendolaine immediately submits, lowering her eyes and quieting her voice. The two eventually admit their love for one another, but Sanpeur is clear that Gwendolaine must not leave her husband for him because it would tarnish her so to do so. Sir Torm becomes aware of their affections and confronts Gwendolaine, who states that Sanpeur is far superior to Torm. Torm then violently strikes and abandons her. She runs to Sanpeur, who reassures her of his love but is also adamant that she return to Torm. Ultimately, she acquiesces:

Your love has done what love should ever do,—  
Illumined duty’s path, and its far goal,  
Hid for a moment by a dark despair ...  
But my soul tells me, deep below the pain,  
I love you more than if you bade me stay. (31-32)

Before she can return though, Torm arrives at Sanpeur's fortress and begins to fight his way inside, striking out at another soldier. Sanpeur throws himself between them and takes the fatal blow himself. On his deathbed, Sanpeur asserts Gwendolaine's innocence and convinces Torm of the importance of being a loving and kind husband; Torm is won over and claims: "For I will be,—God help me,—worthier" (38).

If taken literally, the narrative told in the poem is one of domestic abuse; however, Trask's poem is rather about the love of God than it is a romantic tale. The name *Sanpeur* combines the French words *san*—very close to *sans*, meaning *without*—and *peur*: *without fear*. The name corresponds with Sanpeur's description as the most noble and saintly knight—almost Christ-like in his perfection and devotion to God. Sir Torm's name seems to derive from the word *torment*, and we see Torm as a more earthly being—imperfect, angry, jealous—but also as a being able to change and become better. If we read Sanpeur as representing God's love and Torm representing earthly experience, Trask's poem takes on a very different meaning—one that makes more sense when we consider that she wrote the work while deeply grieving over the loss of the children. Analyzing the poem from this perspective, Gwendolaine seeks to leave Torm—earthly experience or life—for Sanpeur, God's love or heaven. Trask is using the imagery of the knights to demonstrate her despair and desire to leave earth for heaven—to end her own life. Instead, Sanpeur tells her that she must return to her husband, though life on earth can be painful, and in the attempt to reconcile husband and wife, Sanpeur literally sacrifices himself—another very Christ-like action—to protect his servant. In that process, Gwendolaine understands that "to feel" is love and that her duty is to Torm, to help him become a better version of himself—exactly what Trask states is her own duty: to make the world a better place and to help people become better versions of themselves.

In the second poem in the collection, "Kathanal," Trask continues this symbolic representation in the tale of Kathanal and Leorre. Kathanal expresses his deep love for Leorre, who is married to Sir Reginault. After expressing his love, Leorre sends Kathanal on a quest for the Holy Grail, and though she tells Kathanal she returns his love, she adds, "Love makes us strong for what is bitterest; / Were we faint-hearted through imperfect love / We could not part; but loving perfectly / We are full strong for that, and all things else" (48–49). After years of prayer and devotion, Kathanal has a vision of God that lends him strength and a spiritual wholeness, and Leorre is pleased that Kathanal has found such love and peace.

The last poem in the collection is “Christalan,” a young man who leaves home with the dream of seeking fame and heroism as a valiant knight. Unlike the previous two poems, Christalan’s challenge is not divine versus romantic (earthly) love but rather the concept of being “valiant” versus being “true”—the two words engraved on his doublet. The Lady Greane, a lovely maiden, asks him which he would rather be, valiant or true? Christalan proclaims that if he can choose only one, he would prefer to be valiant since he will excel at knighthood and earn great honors and respect. His mother reminds him that “[F]irst comes a time when you / Must serve, and work, and cheer for other knights; ... No ruler can be great unless he learns / With dignity to be a servitor” (61). During his service, he is trampled by a horse and is injured to the point of permanent disability: “I can be true, but never valiant now” (64). At first, he is despondent that he can no longer serve King Constantine physically, but then Christalan overhears a plot to assassinate the King. He stands in nearby shadows, and the assailants see him and believe him to be a spirit—wan, wearing white, and carrying lilies. They speed away, and so Christalan begins an arduous journey to reach the king’s court before the potential assailants. Though he arrives before the plot can unravel, he does so at his own peril; the stress of the journey weakens him to the point of death. In his final moments, Christalan receives great honor and celebration for his heroic act, and the King proclaims Christalan to be “Sir Christalan, the Valiant and True” (74), bestowing the title Christalan had sought.

In “Christalan,” Trask weighs the physical trait of valiant strength against moral or ethical strength and shows the internal strength to be superior. Christalan’s mother, Lady Agathar, tells him that his duty has changed from the physical to the spiritual: “’Tis yours now, to fulfill the higher prayer; / ’Tis yours to gain the inward grace, and leave / The outward sign, great in its way, but less” (65). In this, she not only seeks to protect her son’s mental and emotional well-being but also to give his life, which will continue after his tragic accident, a sense of purpose in service or duty so that he may find happiness and peace. The outcome resembles the situation of Trask herself, who as a woman may not have been able to serve in a physical capacity, but who was developing a strong spiritual stance in which she might find solace for herself and service for others.

*Under King Constantine* was supposedly written in what Trask would call a “clairvoyant strain” over a span of three days (Simpson 214). The names of the knights in the poems greatly resemble the first names of the Trasks and their first two children: Spencer, Katrina, Christina, and Alanson. The first two poems postulate that spiritual love transcends romantic love and end with the characters most in strife gaining a deeper understanding of God’s love and the ability

to continue facing life's trials and tribulations. In the third poem, the notion of service is tied to internal strength, demonstrating that—from Trask's perspective—anyone could fulfill this sense of duty, regardless of physical capabilities. By way of these three narrative poems, Trask literally wrote her way out of grief, torment, and despair and back into a life filled with love and service.

### **Wiawaka House, Retreat for Working Women**

After *Under King Constantine*, Trask devoted herself all the more to service, which extended far beyond her financial donations to various enterprises. In 1903, the Trasks donated property in Lake George, New York to create the Wiawaka Center for Women. Trask felt the inspiration and peace she derived from Lake George and the surrounding mountains, much like the magic she claimed to feel from Yaddo, needed to be shared with as many women as possible, regardless of wealth or class standing. Wiawaka was designed as an affordable retreat for women working downstate, particularly those working in the textile factories in Troy, New York. In conjunction with Wiawaka was Wakonda, a lodge for artists, which included art students invited to spend time there and find inspiration. Perhaps the most famous of the artists who stayed in the Wakonda Lodge was Georgia O'Keeffe, who visited in 1908 as part of the Arts Students League of New York (WAMC podcast).

Trask was drawn to the notion of masculine and feminine balance, in particular the idea of the Eternal-Feminine presented in Goethe's *Faust*, and the creation of Wiawaka occurred while she was in the throes of this great interest and passion. She herself uses the closing lines of Goethe's work in naming Wiawaka. The retreat's main house is a stately Victorian in style, and in its front room stands a central fireplace and mantel. Over the mantel is an ornately displayed plaque on which Trask explains the name and importance of the retreat:

The last lines of Goethe's *Faust* are These  
All things transitory  
But as symbols are sent  
Earth's insufficiency  
How grows to Event  
The Indescribable  
Here it is done  
The Woman's Soul leads us  
Upward and On

Trask is especially focused on the Woman's Soul in the penultimate line. Goethe scholar Harold Jantz explains that this refers to "the feminine principle of love, of mercy and grace, which leads the spirit upward to the highest perfection" (792). For Trask, feeling herself called to great service for others is what helped her after losing her children and gave direction to her life. Jantz further explains, "The 'Eternal-Womanly,' therefore, was unmistakably intended by Goethe to comprise in symbolic form the great creative continuity of life, birth and rebirth in constantly renewed forms, the ultimate resolution of death, destruction, and tragedy in new cycles of life, constructive activity, and fulfillment" (804). Just as with most of her projects and works, Trask took inspiration from a European work of art and added her own twist: creating a new word in what she believed to be in a Native language. According to Trask's essay, *Wiawaka* is "where the music of the Indian and where the legend of the Mohawk and the Abenaki still are told [and so] it seems fitting to use the Indian tongue" (Trask, *Wiawaka Essay*). She combined "wia" and "waka" in what was supposedly a mix of Mohawk and Abenaki, Native American languages, to mean "woman's soul", though experts now claim that these words are inaccurate, and historians are unsure from where she derived these meanings (Jewett).

### ***In the Vanguard***

As Trask developed over time as an intellectual, philanthropist, and writer, she became more direct about her own moral stances. By 1913, she released the play, *In the Vanguard*, a pacifist drama. *In the Vanguard* received mixed reviews, with some reviewers citing its "crude" workmanship and "weak diction," while conceding that "it may well be read for some fine ideas and sane argument" (Simpson 253). Some called the play "sentimental" and noted Trask's lack of "reservation or qualification" to write on matters such as warfare and international

affairs; still other reviewers claimed the play to be of worth with one noting, “in many respects a wonderful book” that “speaks with gentle intensity” (Simpson 254). Regardless of critical acclaim—or lack thereof—Trask’s play was deemed of importance at the time of publication, and “an arrangement was made with the Macmillan Company, publisher of *In the Vanguard*, to send 10,000 copies to US ministries as a part of the Carnegie Peace union’s propaganda in behalf of international arbitration and disarmament” (Simpson 103). The play’s simple set design and small cast made it easily staged, and it was often performed at churches and schools (Simpson 256).

The play centers on the protagonist, Elsa, a young woman in love with Phillip, who is off to fight in the Revolutionary War. Elsa romanticizes the notion of his being a hero, even reading to the other young ladies’ tales of epic romance: “[T]he maiden cared not overmuch for the musty books and dusty parchments of her Father; she loved great and doughty deeds, perilous adventures, the clash of arms, and knights victorious, the crowned conqueror in the lists, the triumphant in battle” (11). In Phillip’s absence, however, she begins to learn more about war from the elders in their town, in particular Mr. Greart, an older gentleman whom the characters revere for his wisdom. Elsa’s change of mind and heart stems from Mr. Greart’s words but also from a prophetic dream she has about the battlefield: “I seemed to see rivers of blood, hideous masses of horror, to hear the piteous cries of women and children and the moans and curses of those who died in the lust of battle” (137–38). She no longer sees war as an act of valor or conquest. When Phillip returns to their village, he is disheartened, as well. He has abandoned his regiment after experiencing his own vision of God’s love and realizing how combat is morally abject, but as a result of his doing so, the townspeople—and his own family—exile him. Trask even highlights the figure of the overly-judgmental, or hypocritically-judgmental Christian when the Rector’s daughter says, “We are Christians, but we can freeze him out all the same” (108). By highlighting religious hypocrisy, Trask precludes any possibility of being misconstrued as acting this way herself.

Seeing the town’s treatment of Phillip, however, only cements Elsa’s devotion to her ideals and to her beloved. Elsa tells him, “A Hero is one who does the hardest thing and you have done the hardest thing, Phillip—the very hardest!” (134). She decides they will marry, regardless of their treatment by the townspeople. Phillip points out that he must be able to find work, and he cannot do that without help. Enter Mr. Greart, who assists Phillip in finding a position as a business partner for a friend in another town. Phillip and Elsa will be together and achieve their “happily ever after,” even though they resisted societal pressure to be and act in a way

that felt morally wrong. In holding to their inner truths, they find happiness with one another, and manage to live lives that support their ethical and moral stances, much as the Trasks had done themselves. As Katrina herself was a firm pacifist, the play advocates for a more ethical humanity.

## **Yaddo as Retreat**

Trask's devotion to what she saw as her duty—providing support and inspiration—continued in the development of Yaddo as an artist retreat. While Trask writes in *Yaddo*, “The story of Yaddo has nothing to do with the mental development of Katrina” (55), nothing could be further from the truth. Near the end of the 1800s, Katrina and Spencer began to reflect over their estates and what would happen to their assets after they died:

When our children were taken from us we felt that Yaddo must be dedicated to some work of service. Both Mr. Trask and I have always been interested intensely in literature and art, and in all artists, especially those who were trying to leave an inspiration and uplift upon their times. (Katrina Trask qtd. in Simpson 100)

Trask claims in *Yaddo* that the notion of turning their home estate into an artist retreat was a stroke of divine inspiration (193). But it must be noted that in the late 1800s, “The concept of an artists' retreat was not a new one, .... Many European artists, writers, and musicians were known to have spent weeks or months with royalty, patrons, or wealthy private families” (Simpson 160). The notion of wealthy patronage, often seen in medieval works and history, is exactly what Trask sought to replicate in her life.

Visitors often commented on the “magic” of Yaddo, well before its inception as an official artists' retreat. Even in the earliest days of their residence in Saratoga Springs, “Katrina herself suggested that Yaddo had a ‘cosmic current’ or a ‘cosmic wire.’ She was certain that God was there in the spirit of Yaddo” (Simpson 54), and she openly welcomed this view of her estate by others. Henry M. Alden, editor of *Harper's Magazine*, said of Yaddo, “[T]his is Greece! The Muses are here. I was walking in the woods and, suddenly, I found the Fountain of Hippocrene” (Trask, *Yaddo* 181). In Greek mythology, the Fountain of Hippocrene was located on Mt. Helicon and was sacred to the Muses. It was created by a strike of Pegasus's hoof, and its waters brought poetic inspiration to those who drank from it. For Alden to claim that Yaddo was the Fountain of Hippocrene was no small comparison. Additionally, the lawyer, politician, and family friend, Edward M. Shepard “felt that Yaddo was a mystical, invisible presence

which guided him in making important decisions” (Simpson 54). Shepard—once famously and humorously compared to “the white part” or good part of a banana by Mark Twain in 1901 (*New York Times*)—went on to support the founding of the artists' retreat, joining its board of trustees and promoting its importance to writers and artists for many years (Trask, *Yaddo*). The Corporation of Yaddo began accepting guests in 1926 and continues today its mission of fostering the arts.

During the winter holiday season, the Trasks held lavish celebrations that included feasts for days, all in the vein of supporting and inspiring everyone around them. They created elaborate, medieval-style festivities and invited a different guest list for each day, including days for family, servants, children of St. Faith's and St. Christina's, the working men of Yaddo and their families, and local homeless populations.

In 1909, Katrina was widowed, having lost Spencer in a train accident, and her outlook on life was once again depressed. She continued, however, to find hope in her home and its importance and function in the world: “The Yaddo Spirit! Blessed brotherhood! Happy friendliness! It is not always as I want it—human nature is here in all its primitive crudity, hot tempers, bitter prejudices and fierce jealousies—but the *ideal* is here and a constant trying to live up to the ideal” (*Yaddo* 105). Trask eventually remarried longtime family friend George Foster Peabody in 1921.

Trask died in January of 1922, and her envisioned artists' colony opened its doors in 1926 under the direction of Elizabeth Ames. For the last century, the retreat has welcomed artists, writers, composers, and the like to find inspiration and peace, and the Foundation provides rooms, studios, and meals (bagged lunches to take to their private studio spaces and family-style breakfasts and dinners in the main dining room) to those whose applications are selected. The list of visiting writers includes: James Baldwin, Truman Capote, Langston Hughes, Ted Hughes, Sylvia Plath, Katherine Anne Porter, Julia Alvarez, Hannah Arendt, Annie Baker, Elizabeth Bishop, Raymond Carver, and David Foster Wallace, to name but a few of the most notable from a list that continues to grow (*Yaddo website*). Katrina Trask's vision has been and continues to be a success, even a century after her death.

## **Conclusion**

By World War I, Trask's vision of the world had darkened a bit, but her efforts did not. She turned sections of the Yaddo gardens into vegetable plots, and "work in the Yaddo gardens was also provided for townswomen and girls who grew food for the war effort and raised sheep on a small tract of land to help replenish the wool supply needed for manufacturing military uniforms and blankets" (Simpson 112). By this time, Trask was an invalid who was cared for mostly by devoted servants; she rarely left her home and even downsized to living in one of the cottages on the estate to save money by not running the larger mansion over the hard winters.

Through these darker years—of war, financial stress, and physical strain—Trask was still surrounded by her Yaddo, with its ever-present reminders of love and hope. Katrina connected Spencer with the symbol of the pine tree—for protection—and herself with the rose—for love, and this symbolism was oft-used by others, including the poet Tertius Van Dyke:

Where, cried my heart, shall I find peace dwelling  
Nor ever fail in its flying quest?—  
"Come," sang the Pine and the Rose of Yaddo,  
"Here in the fullness of life is rest." (Simpson 49)

To this day, the gardens of Yaddo are surrounded by massive pine trees that guard it from the outside world, and inside this protective circle rests the rose garden—a European-inspired, luxurious space with multiple beds filled with roses (see Figure 1). Pines and roses are also carved and painted throughout the Yaddo mansion (Simpson 49–53). Even the original name for their planned artists' retreat was not Yaddo but rather Pine Garde. It was only later decided, after Trask's death, that the name should remain Yaddo (Simpson 128).



**Figure 1:** Pink roses along the colonnade in the Rose Garden with pine trees in the background. Photo credit, Khristeena Lute.

In April of 1917, Trask worked on what would become *Yaddo*, and due to her diligence in writing that volume, her ideas and intentions are clearly stated and archived. Even in the middle of the darkest war, Trask remained hopeful:

Art seems as far off, as unimportant and as unthinkable as does a study of the flora in the midst of the deluge. But, slowly, day by day, during this long bitter year, the thought has been growing within me that, perhaps, after all, it is *more* necessary now than ever to work for the preservation of beauty and of the idea in art: perhaps the struggle to preserve Pine Garde is *more* my duty, now, than ever before. (*Yaddo* 211, author's emphasis)

*Duty* is the word Trask uses—here and throughout her writing. She viewed every act of service as her Christian duty; she wrote every novel, play, poem, and essay with the goal of bettering others' lives. *Under King Constantine* was her own call to action, and that action branched into every facet of her life.

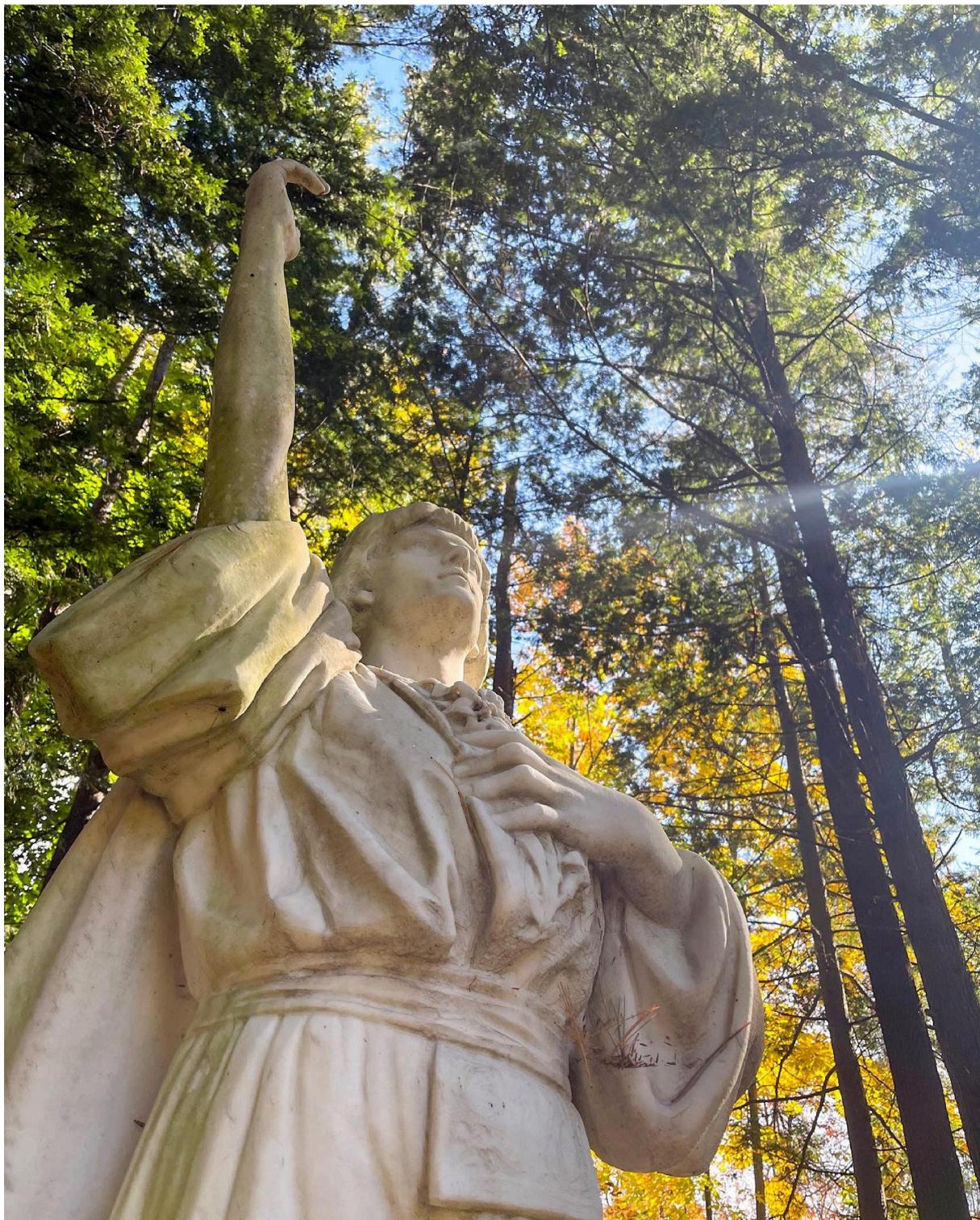
In her unpublished 1995 biography on Trask, Anne Key Simpson writes as her closing line, "In retrospect Katrina Trask, a superb humanitarian aided in her pursuits by Spencer Trask and Foster Peabody, was never deterred from her goals. She merits further study as a woman and a writer" (279). Today, the same notion rings true: Trask has still not received the critical attention warranted by her work, though her service and financial contributions are frequently noted. Her devotion to her dream of a better world combined European pageantry and a sense of patronly duty and was expressed in her literary and philanthropic works. A rare mind indeed, Trask remains unique, and her career critically unexplored.

Trask is buried on the Yaddo grounds, watching over her legacy. The Yaddo gardens remain open to the public, and a sunny day will bring photographers, wedding parties, and wide-eyed tourists, who fill the space. Most of these visitors walk through the massive iron gate without noticing the initials carved over the mantel: S.T. & K.T. (see Figure 2).



**Figure 2:** Formal entrance to the Rose Garden at Yaddo. The entrance includes a pair of Greek revival columns over an ornate iron gate. Photo credit, Khristeena Lute.

A large, white colonnade stretches out along the top of a stepped rise over the rose gardens and is draped over with pink and red roses in the summer months. A few steps below the colonnade, a rounded, stone platform looks over the gardens, facing a row of five statues: four seasonal muses standing in a row and behind them, one more statue, a bit taller than the others and on a special platform. Surrounded by pine trees, Trask's knight Christalan, created for her children, watches over rose gardens, muses, artists, and visitors alike, remaining valiant and true for more than a century (see Figure 3).



**Figure 3:** The statue of the fictional knight, Christalan, located in the Rose Garden at Yaddo. Photo credit, Khristeena Lute.

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