

*At a meeting of the FACULTY OF ARTS AND SCIENCES on May 5, 2015, the following
tribute to the life and service of the late Wolfhart Peter Heinrichs
was spread upon the permanent records of the Faculty.*

WOLFHART PETER HEINRICHS

BORN: October 3, 1941

DIED: January 23, 2014

Wolfhart P. Heinrichs was one of the leading Arabists of his generation. A tenured professor at Harvard since 1978, he succeeded Muhsin Mahdi as the James Richard Jewett Professor of Arabic in 1996. He trained an entire generation of Arabists and Islamicists in his thirty-five years teaching here. His Arabic philology course was, over all these years, the gateway course for Harvard students to all serious work in Arabic. Not only a beloved teacher, he was a treasured colleague.

Born in Cologne, Germany, on October 3, 1941, Wolfhart was the son of a lecturer in Old Norse, Anna Heinrichs, and a professor of Old Germanic studies at Giessen, H. Matthias Heinrichs. He was schooled in an unusual secondary school in Cologne that offered Hebrew, which gave him his first contact with Semitic studies. In his university studies in Semitic languages, Arabic and Islamic studies, and philosophy at Cologne, Frankfurt, London, and Giessen, he worked under major scholars of the previous generation such as Werner Caskel, R. B. Sergeant, Ewald Wagner, and Rudolf Sellheim. He took his Ph.D. degree in 1967, and after a post-doctoral appointment to the German Oriental Institute in Beirut in 1967-1968, he held a faculty position at Giessen from 1968 until 1977, when he came as a visiting professor to Harvard, where he would remain as a tenured professor from 1978 until his death. He established his scholarly reputation early in his career when he worked with Fuat Sezgin in Frankfurt to produce the monumental first volume of *Geschichte des arabischen Schrifttums* (1967), which Sezgin dedicated to him. From 1989, he served as a co-editor of the major second edition of the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, for which he himself wrote over fifty entries. He was known internationally as a world authority on Arabic literature and language. His encyclopedic knowledge was stunning, and he had a remarkable command of an awe-inspiring number of languages, including German, English, French, Italian, Spanish, Russian, Latin, Greek, Arabic, Persian, and Turkish, not to mention Berber, Hebrew, Aramaic, Ethiopic, and the African San tongue, Mbarakwengo. In his scholarship, he ranged with disarming modesty, magisterial learning, and trenchant incisiveness across varied fields of Islamic learning, from poetry, literary theory, and

dialectology to jurisprudence and theology—a range reflected also in the variety of courses he offered his students.

Wolffhart never saw languages as an end in themselves, but always as a key to understanding the history, thought, and culture of those who used them in a given period or context—their particular and crucially important *Sitz im Leben*. In all of his work he was keenly aware of the changes over time in the semantic fields of terms and concepts and the agents of those changes. For example, in his classic article, "On the Genesis of the Haqīqa-Majāz Distinction," he showed how the evolution of the meaning of the Arabic term *majāz* from "idiomatic usage" to "figurative usage" stemmed from the efforts of early theologians to make sense of apparent anthropomorphisms in the Qur'ān. His masterly 1977 work, *The Hand of the North Wind*, showed vividly how the central term, *ist'ārah* ("metaphor"), developed new meanings as the focus of medieval literary theorists shifted from analysis of early Arabic poetry to demonstrating the stylistic inimitability of the Qur'ān. Wolffhart's findings on the importance of the literary theorists' ideas to the broader concerns of their time are of immediate relevance to anyone working on the early history of Qur'ānic exegesis, jurisprudence, and rational theology.

Those who knew Wolffhart as colleague, teacher, or friend (or all of these) can testify not only to his venerable international standing as a scholar, but also to his deep humanity, so evident in his unfailing patience, supportiveness, and generosity of spirit. In the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, he had unfailingly cordial relations as well as substantive intellectual exchanges with all of his colleagues, whatever their fields of study. Always modest, even self-effacing, Wolffhart was at every moment ready to offer his help or guidance to any student, colleague, friend, or even stranger who approached him. He did not try to mold his students in his own image but rather to open up to them a range of possibilities to suit their interests. Many of his graduate students are today among the leading lights of Arabic and Islamic studies in universities and colleges around the world. He loved poetry and humor, not least when both involved multiple languages as well as translations among them. He could compose in, or translate into, Arabic almost as well and rapidly as into German or English, and he took great delight in word play, not least in limericks (again in several languages). He shared his love for language and his specialization in Arabic and Islamic studies—not to mention his affection for animals ranging from cats to rats to rabbits—with the love of his life, his wife, Alma Giese Heinrichs, herself an Arabist and translator of note, whom he wed in 1980.

Wolffhart Heinrichs died on January 23, 2014, and is survived by his wife, Alma, as well as three siblings in Germany. He was taken from us too soon after a brief hospitalization only months before his planned retirement. With his passing all who knew him have lost much and feel that loss keenly; but all will always have also many happy memories of a remarkable scholar, dedicated teacher, gracious and generous human being, and steadfast mentor and friend.

Respectfully submitted,

Khaled El-Rouayheb

William Granara

Peter Machinist

Roy Mottahedeh

William Graham, Chair