Hendiadys
In Honor of Professor Judith Hallett
Gregory A. Staley

I speak the words which Vergil might have written had he composed the epic poem about Judy Hallett that so she richly deserves: litteras feminasque cano . . . . “Of literature and women I sing.” (Of course those words do not fit the rhythm of epic, but that is not why Vergil did not write them). Instead, Vergil began his Aeneid with the words arma uirumque cano, “Arms and the man I sing.” Critics regularly point out that Vergil’s opening is an excellent example of hendiadys, the figure of speech in which we say one thing through two, which is literally what the word means in Greek. Aeneas is an “armed man” and even the word arma in Latin hints at the Greek word for man, andra, which is the first word of Homer’s Odyssey. Vergil’s opening, in other words, highlights the androcentrism of Greek and Roman culture.

My alternative opening for a Vergilian epic may sound, therefore, culturally incorrect, more like an oxymoron than a form of hendiadys, since the idea that ancient literature and women could be one thing made of two seems to fly in the face of the evidence. Yet it is one of Judy’s signal achievements that she has highlighted the centrality of women and their achievements in the literature of Greece and particularly Rome. When I first began to learn about feminist methodology and its applications to the Classics I often would hear critics say that scholars like Judy were anachronistically imposing modern perspectives onto an alien world. BC simply was not PC. I would like to use just one of Judy’s many scholarly contributions to this debate to show that she was right and the critics were wrong.
Ovid tells the story of Baucis and Philemon, an elderly and impoverished couple who welcome Jupiter and Mercury, disguised as humans, into their home and invite them to dine at their table. In an article written to honor one of her own professors, Katherine Geffcken, and developed through collaboration with students in her class on Ovid, Judy has argued that “Ovid . . . presents the relationship between Baucis and Philemon . . . as marked by both equality and mutuality.” Ovid makes of this husband and wife pair an hendiadys: Baucis anus parilique aetate Philemon, “Baucis the aged wife and Philemon of equal age.” In so many ways Ovid’s story of their marriage is a tale of equality, a point emphasized by the image of their dining table. It has three legs but one of them is impar, “unequal.” So the couple creates the kind of equality for the table that they have created in their lives together: they place a broken piece of pottery under the short leg and thus make it parem, “equal.” As a reward for their virtue, the gods grant their wish that they might die on the same day. While the rest of the community is flooded, Baucis and Philemon’s home is saved and turned into a temple. Thanks to their virtue, their mortgage did not end up under water.

Judy, whose life and career have been marked by a quest for justice and equality for all, found in Baucis and Philemon’s tale an illustration of her own values. She did not, however, read those values into the story; they were already there. She helped us to see them. Judy’s life and work have made of litteras feminasque a natural hendiadys, a twofer, as we say today. In the process she has worked not just on this combination in antiquity but in the present as well, as she has mentored and nurtured the many women who have been inspired by her model to become classicists and to see their lives
reflected in the texts of the ancient world. Thank you, Judy Hendiadys Hallett!