

The Last Word

Memories, insights, and reflections

The Voice of Mary Marshall

In the fall of 1958, a young man from the Midwest, away from home for the first time and eager, as a graduate assistant, to be part of the academic literary scene, met a woman whose learning and temperament were to capture him at once—first with awful intimidation, then with simple awe.

This figure before whom most others appeared diminished was the fabled Mary Marshall. The young man was me.

She appeared before her students with the spaciousness of a mind that contained all we needed to know of Marlowe or Spenser or Ibsen. But for me it was Shakespeare's shade, above all, that she made material. Whether, during an autumn day in the Hall of Languages, Delmore Schwartz was intoning *The Waste Land*, or Leonard Brown was ransacking *Under the Volcano* for clues to the Consul's heartsickness, or George P. Elliott was allowing us to overhear Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn aboard the raft, it was the voice of Mary Marshall delivering the sweet cavatinas of Juliet, the sotto voce curses of Iago, or the heart-cracking tremolos of Shylock, that remained into the evening. One knew what it was to be romanced by language.

Walking briskly and determinedly across campus in the Syracuse April or gracefully toasting Malcolm Cowley at a reception in her Euclid Avenue flat, Mary Marshall was like some natural occurrence—an eclipse, a comet—that one irresistibly attends to.

She was both manner and method; in point of fact, it is impossible to separate the two. What

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One of the most revered of Syracuse faculty members is Mary Marshall, professor emerita of English. During her nearly 40 years at Syracuse, she has presided over thousands of class sessions, including the one shown above—the final lecture given in the Hall of Languages before its renovation in 1979–80. Today, she teaches at University College and continues to infect students with her enthusiasm for the language.

we learned we knew was sent us from a brain educated in the finest schools (Vassar and Bryn Mawr), deserving of accolades for a Guggenheim scholar and honorary resident fellow at Yale, and responsible for sundry publications on medieval drama, Boethius and the Roman theater, and the liturgical drama. Yet her brain transformed such knowledge into a style born of a caring sensibility—care for the greatest literary art and care for the

listeners who gathered before her.

Dr. Marshall's colleagues, if I am not inaccurate, were as deeply impressed as were her students. These persons and the unique qualities that each radiated—the benign strength of chairman Sanford Meech, the cool wit and charm of James Elson, the virtuosity of David Owen, the casual but cautious mind of Donald Dike, and the fierce commitment to honesty and accuracy of Walter Sutton—

were only augmented in discussion with Mary Marshall. We graduate students listened to what was exchanged in the chairman's office in the basement of the "old" Hall of Languages in the late 1950s and into the 1960s, hoping to appear someday in the likenesses of these, the initiated.

I never knew Mary Marshall to retreat from the most formidable contender in discussions of what she had mastered and felt so well as a lover of the word. If challenged, even by a callow student, she would listen syllable for syllable and then, in the spirit of intellectual honesty, deliver the goods in a fashion that left small room for further contest.

Mary Marshall's staying power is such that she has remained as a professor emerita of English literature and drama in Syracuse's University College. It is a continuing legacy, then, unto not only the students of my generation but to those now beginning or returning to the world of higher education.

I am not among them these days in Mary Marshall's classroom, but my imagination sees—before a group of listeners as awestruck as this youth from the Midwest—a woman part steel, part wool, whose voice in lecture, as in conversation or argument, sounds like a well-tuned instrument capable of supremely subtle nuances and modulations.

I don't think Mary Marshall would care for valentines addressed to her. Still, one cannot resist sending her her beloved Shakespeare, as token of love from all of us who learned more of poetry and humanity through her:

*Age cannot wither her, nor
custom stale
Her infinite variety; Other women
cloy
The appetites they feed, but she
makes hungry
Where most she satisfies.
(Antony and Cleopatra, II, ii, 243)*

—Lee J. Richmond '61, '70