Hunter Hamilton Citation for Keyne Cheshire

This teacher is a master of the “a-ha” moment when unexpected connections are revealed, that moment when close reading spills over into life with claims of profundity and insight. Such moments, though they may catch us unaware, do not happen by accident, but follow from the graceful fusion of disciplined expertise with sensitivity, imagination, and the willingness to relate to students as one vulnerable self to another. Such is the signature of this professor.

His passion creates a fever to learn. As one student notes, his “palpable reverence for the languages and the characters, the achievements and the flaws of [certain] civilizations is infectious. And I caught it from him.” Another student, identifying himself as one who suffered a “complete lack of a knack for the language,” testifies that he persevered because this professor “inspires an engagement with learning that has little to do with achievement and has everything to do with love and curiosity.”

Love and curiosity sow the seeds from which engagement may flourish, but by themselves are insufficient to complete the task of learning. Ancient Greek wisdom suggests the complementary adage: μελέτη τò πâν – practice is everything. The point has not been lost on this professor’s students, one of whom put it most aptly: “He made us love the subject while also making us work to love it.” That hard work of conjugation and declension, of philology and text criticism, describe not only the effort he summoned forth, but the path on which he leads students to see how seemingly minor details coalesce to make available a fuller, richer, encounter with the lives and cultures of antiquity, from Alexander the Great to the libraries at Alexandria, from a Sophoclean tragedy to its transformation as an Old West folk-musical. By example and instruction, this professor has shown how the hard work of reading slowly and critically can become a pleasurable and meaningful activity of daily life.

In the end his students become colleagues, worthy to collaborate and field the hardest of questions. Having faced a barrage of such questions at his thesis defense, one student remembers his initial shock at the professor’s shift from supporter to interlocutor: “Why would the man who had been so encouraging of my thesis . . . suddenly seem almost adversarial? . . . When the heat of the moment had passed, I recognized the wisdom of what he did that day. He gave me a foretaste not only of future academic life but also of life in general. Demands are made on the spot. Tough answers are required without preparation. Curveballs fly from those we think we know best. At my defense he did the best thing an advisor could have done. He, who had led me to a cliff with a fine view, pushed me off—because he knew I would have to figure out how to fly.” And fly his students have done: as collaborators and professionals in their own right; as learners from love and curiosity. They fly under the aegis of Minerva, the goddess of wisdom, whose owl-figured presence as a candle has been known to grace his classroom, passed hand to hand, like the teaching of a master to his disciples.

Because you inspire others to follow the love of ancient testimony to the beauty, the struggle, and poignancy of human life, to study as well as to live with passion and discipline, we gratefully recognize you, Keyne Cheshire as a 2011 winner of the Hunter Hamilton Award.