

Professor Mimi Fenton

Distinguished UW Alumna

“I love scholarship, but I feel most passionate about teaching,” says Mimi (Mary C.) Fenton, UW English alumna and prominent Milton professor.

Fenton attributes success in her field to the mentorships of English professors such as UW’s Art Simpson, Duncan and Janice Harris, Keith Hull and David Roberts. “As scholars and teachers, these people were incredible and influential role models,” Fenton says.

For example, Simpson liked to use sports metaphors in class. He told a room full of English GAs: “The classroom is like a football game, and this is the big leagues. There’s always going to be one kid who’s trying to sack the quarterback.”

Fenton encountered one of these students on a Friday in her third or fourth year teaching. They were reading Oedipus. “Why do we have to read this crap?” an engineering student asked. “We have Nintendo to play and cars to drive and TVs to watch. Don’t these people have anything better to do?”

It gave Fenton pause. “I realized I was making assumptions that these students valued literature like I valued literature,” she says.

She didn’t want to get angry and “lose this kid,” so she let class out five minutes early and spent the weekend thinking about the value of literature. She wrote her list of reasons, which included things like, “We learn about ourselves and being human,” “Tragedy saves us,” “We understand the usefulness and inevitability of suffering,” and “We’re never alone if we have literature.”

Fenton brought in her list the following Monday. She laid aside her syllabus, and they talked about the

question. After getting past the usual reasons such as “It’s good for you” and “It improves your vocabulary,” the students began thinking deeply and honestly about it, and they had a great discussion.

Not only that, but Fenton gained a convert. Later, after they had read *The Tempest*, that same student was unsatisfied with the ending of that Shakespeare play, and so he took it upon himself to write a sequel. “He’s one of my greatest senses of accomplishment,” Fenton says. She had reached him.

“People say, ‘If you can touch the life of one person, you’ve made a difference in the world,’” Fenton says, shaking her head. “That is setting your bar way too low. If I’ve got 30 people in a class, I have 30 relationships and 30 opportunities and, therefore, 30 items of moral obligation. I have to reach each one of them.”

Fenton graduated from UW with a bachelor’s (with honors) and a master’s in English before going on to earn her Ph.D. from the University of Kentucky. She is a leading scholar, researcher and teacher of John Milton (1608–74), 17th century English poet and author of the epic poem *Paradise Lost*, and she has published numerous articles and four books that have received high academic praise. Since 1992, she has taught at Western Carolina University, where she also served as dean of the graduate school and research.

She has earned numerous honors and awards, including the South Atlantic Modern Language Association Excellence in Teaching award and the University of North Carolina Board of Governors Award for Teaching



Mimi Fenton
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Excellence. Next year, she will research and teach in Budapest, Hungary, as a Fulbright Scholar.

Why Milton? “Milton appeals to my sense of rolling up my sleeves and taking on the big questions of life,” she says. And students respond to Milton. “*Paradise Lost* always gets them,” she says. “It’s just magnificent.”

She returns to the question of literature, of art. What difference can it make? “All the difference in the world,” she says. “Look at the world that doesn’t value literature, doesn’t value art. When we have people who aren’t steeped in what literature teaches us about empathy, about tragedy. When we can’t understand or value or respect other human beings. When we put other things before our humanity.”

She sums it up this way: “Art always has been the height of civilization. When literature and art are peripheralized, we lose our capacity for respect and for empathy.”