

Some Words after Dinner

“Soft you, a word or two before you go . . .”

“First my fear, then my curtsy, last my speech”

My fear that all would not go well today is past; it has, and my curtsy is to all those who have helped make today not only a success - but a delight.

My first courtesy – in which I hope you will join me - is owed to those who have prepared and served our excellent dinner – the staff of the Kitchens and the Hall.

My second to those who have contributed to the day’s events: the scholars: Brian Gibbons, Ronnie Mulryne, Reavley Gair, Caroline Gonda, and Hester Lees-Jeffries; the directors: Robin Telfer, Simon Godwin (who with his partner Rosie is the proud parent of twin golden girls just a fortnight old), and Jay Miller (whose new play *Removal Men* was born even more recently); the trainee players: Marco Young, Tilly Fletcher, Caitlin Carr and Sam Knights; the professional entertainers: Helen Duff, Scott Handy, Nigel Hess, Edward Wickham and our Choir Consort; and to our speaker, Jonathan Bate. For all, our thanks.

And I would also like to send our greetings to those who for various reasons are not here, but who have given much to Shakespeare and Catz: to Peter Hall and Ian McKellen (I think a card is going around), to Nicolas Kent (Tricycle Theatre), Dominic Dromgoole (whose tenure at the Globe already looks like a golden age, and who brought the wonderful Wanamaker Theatre to completion), and to the remarkable actors John Shrapnel and Caroline Horton, whose professional commitments made them in the end unable to take the roles in our pre-dinner entertainment which were – enthusiastically if unprofessionally - understudied by Hester and by me.

And I would also like to thank those – which may include some among you here – who have contributed towards our ambition to endow a College Lectureship in English. At our first Reunion, five years ago, Jeremy Paxman spoke at the dinner and expressed – with not uncharacteristic cynicism – the expectation that we’d be asking for money soon. Well, unless five years constitutes “soon”, Jeremy (who is unable to be here because he is torturing some *University Challenge* contestants in Manchester) was both premature and prescient, because it *would* be very nice to think that we might advance further towards that goal over the next couple of years, having already received several significant gifts, including one from the novelist Joanne Harris – who read MML, for heaven’s sake – and would have been with us tonight had she not been on a book tour in Italy. Enough for now: I shall be writing to you.

As I said in the initial invitation to this event, we have anniversaries to celebrate: Glen Cavaliero’s thirtieth year as a Fellow Commoner – none uncommoner than he – Caroline’s twentieth as a Fellow and Hester’s tenth. Honour also to Geoffrey Stokell, the earliest matriculate here, in the same year as Peter Hall – 1950, to Francis Warner on his sixtieth anniversary of joining the College, Larry Lucas on his fiftieth such, and to Canon Shamus Williams on his fortieth, a man whose career path was surely laid out when I cast him as the Archbishop of York in *Henry IV Part 2*.

Which brings me to Shakespeare.

When the College was founded in 1473, Richard III was just 21, with 12 more years to live before Bosworth Field. And we cannot with any certainty in 1473 identify a single one of Shakespeare's ancestors.

When the Bard was born, John Mey was our tenth Master, later installed as Bishop of Carlisle in 1577. If he ever saw *Richard II*, performed and printed during his episcopate, he might have relished his namesake Bishop's passionate speech in Parliament in defence of the deposed Richard – and Henry IV's generous pardon for Carlisle at the play's end.

When the Bard died, John Hills was the thirteenth Master, of whom the College's historian W.H.S. Jones has only to say: "Born at Fulbourn, he was buried at Horseheath. His Mastership was not a happy one, as he was at variance with the Fellows both in domestic and in political matters."

With us tonight, to celebrate this Reunion and Shakespeare, we are delighted to have our 38th Master, Jean Thomas, and our 39th, Mark Welland. And my 6th and 7th - as I embark on my fortieth year as a Fellow, and therefore, even by the traditional calculation, have a whole generation of my students before me: a College is a lovesome thing, God wot.

And now I would like to ask you to rise and drink two toasts:

The first to St Catharine's College;

And the second, to use Ben Jonson's words – slightly adapted

To the memory of our beloved, the Author Master William Shakespeare, and what he hath left us

"Our revels now are ended. These our actors,
As I foretold you, were all spirits, and
Are melted into air, into thin air;
And like the baseless fabric of this vision,
The cloud-capped towers, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great Globe itself,
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve;
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
As dreams are made on, and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep."

"Jesu, the days that we have seen". The Bar is open. Good night.

Paul Hartle