

From the rear of the coach came more unexpected arrivals. Shakespeare, it transpired, had invited a few characters known only by report; though never seen or heard, they were conceived, he insisted, in the same locker-room of thought and vision as the others, and must be present. One by one their identities were given out: Rosaline of Verona (now happily married), maid Marian, puller of pints at Wincot's local, funny-man Yorick, comforter and entertainer for the child lost in a castle's cheerless corridors, Barbara whose folk songs lulled little Desdemona, Double (wearing his archer's gold around his neck), Clarabel, soon to be Miranda's sister-in-law, Sycorax whose deeds rocked the islanders' memories; and last to leave, country lads in unaccustomed suits: Stephen Sly, John Naps, Peter Turf, Henry Pimpernel.

These final guests joined the others in the best seats to witness the hour-long panegyrics that preceded the conferring of the Award by the Academy's President, Shakespeare's short, affecting acceptance speech, and the prolonged standing ovation that followed it. On leaving the Hall after the curtain came down, two unnamed Gentlemen, from one of the last plays, were cajoled by a reporter with ready mike into saying what they felt about the ceremonies. Hesitatingly, one of them began to describe how at Shakespeare's reunion with his characters, 'we seemed almost, with staring on one another, to tear the cases of our eyes. There was speech in our dumbness, language in our very gesture... a notable passion of wonder appeared in us, but the wisest beholder could not say if the importance were joy or sorrow'.

The other Gentleman declared, 'such a deal of wonder is broken out within this hour that Poet Laureates cannot express it', adding shrewdly, 'this news which is called true is so like an old tale that the verity of it is in strong suspicion'. Only one sadness clouded the anniversary proceedings, constituting for many people, as one of the Gentlemen said, 'a woe universal': Shakespeare declined to meet press or public. Instead, he asked the academicians, who were brimming with congratulatory spirit at the extraordinary success of their evening, to speak on his behalf: to thank the world from his heart for its enthusiastic interest over the centuries, and to forgive his inability to stay longer than he did, on account of the infirmities of old age, and so on. He had in fact soon slipped away from another side door, disguised, so one tabloid later claimed, as an usherette, leaving the fireworks to go on bursting brilliantly into the night.



Honouring Shakespeare

A Poetic Fantasy
on the 400th Anniversary of his Death

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ROGER PRINGLE

for Ann and Gerry - all good wishes - Roger

Printed for the author to send to friends whose hearts, he believes, are warmed by the tributes being paid to Shakespeare in this special year, though not perhaps by this one.

The illustration is 'A Fancy Sketch, to the Memory of Shakespeare', drawn by G. M. Woodward and etched by Isaac Cruickshank, first published in 1797.

At first he didn't want to know, and claimed their messages never got through to him in his cloud-capped retreat; but under pressure from some of the great and the good, Prince C, Judi D, Ken B, etcetera, he relented, agreed to attend a Gala at the Grand Old Hall of Fame to receive an Exceptional (he *had* been dead four centuries) Lifetime Award from the Academy of All the Nations. What helped persuade him to accept was a proposal the seats would be reserved exclusively for characters who owed their being to the plays created for them. He was prepared to leave the choice of invitees to the Academy on condition it was willing to hold fifty premium seats for his own possible use, 'in case I wish to make any additions', he told the puzzled board, which nevertheless readily consented, and, over raised glasses, contracts were signed and exchanged.

The fantastic day arrives; fans gather on street corners to chatter in a hundred languages, bands begin to blare, daffodils are out in force, flags flutter, folk dancers caper, swans embark on manoeuvres, church bells go crazy, works by and about him bombard the bookshops, broadcasters, giving global coverage to the event, fall over themselves to find words to blazon his genius, and texters and tweeters are locked in collective thrall, anticipating the conferment of the Lifetime Award. As evening nears, the plushiest of red carpets is rolled from the doors of the Hall of Fame where, it is announced, the Great Man slipped in quietly at the back some hours before. Crowds press against barriers, paparazzi take up positions, lights flash, young and old gape, gasp, clap, as roll calls of celebrities are spotted as they start making exits from lines of cabs and limousines stretching to the world's end.

A beaming Rosalind walks hand in hand with Orlando, both stopping for a brief chat and to give autographs; Falstaff salutes the sea of faces with a flourish of his stick and shares a joke with the Nurse accompanying him; a group of chanting women offer flowers to Ophelia, Hamlet passes them by without any show of feeling; Touchstone, sporting a loud check suit, strides ahead of Audrey, in a skimpy lycra number and goatskin boots; Launce's dog causes amusement by cocking a leg at several of the tubs of resplendent hydrangeas; Titania wins plaudits stepping out in a full-length gown, its sequins sparkling like her ring's huge Indian sapphire; Macbeth looks daggers at the throng, adjusts his sporrans; Richard limps up the steps, throwing a winning smile; Malvolio, after tipping the driver, takes a quick selfie; Shylock arrives to cheers on a slow-wheeling bicycle.

Iago, in razor-sharp regimentals, fingering a cheroot, waits while Othello acknowledges his many admirers; taking ages to leave his cab, unshaven, wearing shades and rakish hat, Jaques ignores the guessing onlookers; Caesar, in well-cut white suit, strides across the carpet, while Brutus, some way behind, fiddles with his mobile; Quince has a copy of *The Stage* poking out of a pocket; Perdita, met with warm applause, gives a friendly wave, beside her young partner-prince in naval uniform; wheelchair-bound, Lear is pushed up a ramp by Cordelia; Cleopatra, sexy as any Hollywood star, emerges from her Rolls in green silk décolletage, with high hemline; Puck rushes forward to smooth the wrinkled carpet; screeching to a halt, Romeo drops off Juliet to rapturous acclaim before parking his roadster around the corner, alongside Speed's old Ford.

These and many other persons of the plays were beamed instantly into homes about the earth as they entered the Hall of Fame to honour the master of their making. Then, to everyone's surprise, news broke about a coach expected soon, carrying a contingent of unknown guests invited to attend at Shakespeare's personal request. Outside, the crowd was hushed; inside the academicians could not hide their concern, kept checking messages, wondered why Shakespeare had felt any need to add to the multitude of characters so carefully chosen, by their presidium, from nearly all his works. When the bus drew up, spectators were hard pressed to recognize any of its assorted passengers, as were most members of the reception committee, though they shook hands warmly with these latecomers before escorting them to seats in the front stalls.

Asked about these extra guests, Shakespeare explained that though they all had stories he'd barely touched upon they should not be thought of as threads in tapestries but as indispensable to the fabric of their plays; 'besides', he added, 'I was, and remain, fond of them'. Reuters, now briefed, released their names. First off the bus had been James Gurney, who speaks four words (in *King John*), accompanied by Deiphobus, the Trojan, who says five; others favoured with fifteen seconds of fame followed: Dighton and Forest, Mariana (of the moated grange), Marcellus, Mardian, Menteith, Mouldy, and Mutius; hard on their heels came Panthino, Phrynia, Philo, Peter Thump, Travers, Timandra, and Tribonius, Ross, Reynaldo, Seyton, Siward, Voltimand, Varius, Willoughby and Woodville; then clambering down, a posse of knights and earls from various warring countries.