

Chair of Governors, Governors, Headmaster, Ladies and Gentleman: on behalf of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, Stratford-upon-Avon, thank you for inviting me to speak this evening, and to form part of an important chapter in the lives of everyone present. This is a transitional moment for all students, parents, and teachers, as people move on to the next stage of their education, careers, and working lives.

It is good to be asked to say a few words in the year that marks the 400th Shakespearian Anniversary. Whatever your experience of Shakespeare, his works, and his impact on our culture, help to form all aspects of my working life. It's been my delight to live in Stratford-upon-Avon for twenty-one years: first as a post-graduate student at the Shakespeare Institute, University of Birmingham, and then as an employee of The Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, where I'm Head of Research. Our Poet Laureate, Dame Carol Ann Duffy, was only half joking when she said that for all writers, a visit to Shakespeare's Birthplace is like going to Bethlehem. The Shakespeare Birthplace Trust is an independent, not-for-profit organisation that looks after the five houses associated with Shakespeare and his family; we make available a major Shakespeare library and archive; and we are committed to promoting the knowledge and appreciation of Shakespeare throughout the world. So I'd like to take a few moments to invite all students, and their parents, to think about your past, present, and future, and to frame what I say with some Shakespearian reflections of my own.

Shakespeare writes in Sonnet 30: 'When to the sessions of sweet, silent thought / I summon up remembrance of things past.' So think about your past. Your past at this school. Reach for a significant moment or two during your time

at Queen Mary's which, looking back, seem to have made a positive difference to you as an individual.

Visits to Stratford-upon-Avon have, since the centuries since Shakespeare was considerate enough to be born there, often proved to be inspirational. The poet John Keats was certainly inspired by the genius of the place during his visit to Shakespeare's Birthplace on 3 October 1817 with his friend, Benjamin Bailey (with whom he was staying in Oxford). In the Birthplace visitors' book, under 'Place of Abode', Keats wrote 'Everywhere'. In chapter 27 of Charles Dickens's *Nicholas Nickleby*, Mrs Witterly perhaps conveys something of Dickens's own affection for Stratford-upon-Avon and Shakespeare when she says: 'I find I take so much more interest in his plays, after having been to that dear little dull house he was born in! [...] I don't how it is, but after you've seen the place and written your name in the little book, somehow or other you seem to be inspired; it kindles up quite a fire within one.'

The moment from my school years that made a significant difference to me was my first visit to Stratford-upon-Avon. I was fifteen, and my school in York announced that it was taking a trip to see John Caird's production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The cost of the trip was £16.00. This was expensive, the most we'd ever been asked to pay for a school-trip, in fact the school said that we could pay in installments. I remember taking the letter home and leaving it on the kitchen table. Years later, my parents told me: 'we saw that letter on the kitchen table, and it was obvious you had to go.' It was a great day. We weren't even studying the play, but the reviews of the production had been excellent. The fairies were dressed as punk-rockers and wore Doc Martin boots; the forest was a fantastical refuse-site; the mechanicals' performance of the play-within-the-

play 'Pyramus and Thisbe' in act five seemed to have us rolling in the aisles. Needless to say, this was a significant moment in my understanding and enjoyment of Shakespeare, and left me with a feeling of wanting more, a feeling which, so far, has not left me. What is it from your past that you feel has made a significant and positive difference to you?

Shakespeare famously says in *As You Like It* that 'All the world's a stage / And all the men and women merely players.' We are all of us actors in this wide and universal theatre, and the moments that make up our lives slip past us, like a performance. We live our scripts in the present; we have to improvise, we hope for the best, and trust others. I find it helpful to reflect on the day that has past and, at the end of each day, to review it, a little like I might review a theatre performance, concert, or film. I spend quite a lot of time watching performances of Shakespeare, and, in recent weeks saw, in Stratford-upon-Avon, what happened to be my 22nd production of *King Lear*. Every production, of course, is different, and has generated different feelings within me. In thinking about how we might start to take stock of our present moments, our days, adapting three of the questions I would normally ask about a theatre production might be helpful.

- **How has today made you feel?**
- **What is worth remembering about today, and why?**
- **What difference has your day has made to you and to those around you?**

Asking these questions at the end of each day might help us to digest the experiences that are constantly forming us as individuals, and to understand how our behaviour is playing its part in the lives of the people around us.

Finally, in thinking a little bit about what the future has in store, it might be encouraging to remember that by the age of eighteen, William Shakespeare had already made rather a mess of his. He'd got his girlfriend, Anne Hathaway, pregnant. She was eight years older than him, and he would have to marry her. This meant, of course, that he wouldn't be able to complete a formal apprenticeship to a trade, unlike most of his contemporaries. Apprenticeships would normally finish when the man turned twenty-one, and apprentices were not allowed to be married. Between 1570 and 1630, the average age for men in Stratford-upon-Avon to marry was 24. During that sixty-year period, only three men got married under the age of twenty, and of those three Shakespeare was the only one whose wife to be was already pregnant. So, although William and Anne had acted entirely naturally, it resulted in a highly uncommon outcome for the culture of their own time. It meant, in effect, that Shakespeare, by the age of eighteen, had basically made a complete mess of things, and this would have been noted among his family, friends, and Stratford neighbours.

It meant, too, that he had to shape his future differently, and with imagination. He'd had a grammar school education, had no doubt been inspired by one or two remarkable schoolmasters, and he was probably already writing poetry and prose, and wanting to act. I wish we could know more about the ten years between Shakespeare's enforced marriage and his appearance on the London theatrical scene. In 1593, his name burst in to print with one of the most popular books of the time: the comic, erotic, and ultimately tragic poem, *Venus and Adonis*, based on the story by the Roman poet Ovid, which he would have studied at grammar school. It was printed by his old school friend, Richard Field, and dedicated to the young and wealthy Earl of Southampton. In the following

year, Shakespeare was able to purchase founding shares in a brand-new theatre company, the Lord Chamberlain's Men, and three years after that, in 1597, he was able to buy the largest house in the borough of Stratford-upon-Avon, New Place. It stood on the corner opposite the grammar school and Shakespeare would have walked past it every day while he was a pupil.

In recent years, the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust has conducted a significant archaeological dig of the site. New Place was a large dwelling, had between twenty and thirty rooms, was the only house in Stratford that had a courtyard, and it would become Shakespeare's family home for the rest of his life, his place in the country to which he could retreat and write the next blockbuster for the company and theatres in which he owned shares. Our big project for the anniversary year of 2016 has been to re-present the site of New Place, to evoke something of Shakespeare's creativity there in the home of a writer, and tell afresh the story of Shakespeare who, because of New Place and his putting down roots in the town, divided his time between Stratford-upon-Avon and London. This brief account of Shakespeare's most formative years – between the ages of 18 and 33 – reminds us, of course, that the future is to be embraced with the best that we have in us, and, whatever mess we might make of things along the way, it's what we bring to the world from ourselves that can help shape our world, future and our lives within it.

So, it's very much in the spirit of Shakespeare himself, that I wish everyone well as you continue to cherish elements of your past, understand your present as clearly as you can, and carry your best hopes with you into the future.