

# UCL Department of English

## Alumni Newsletter, Summer 2009



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### Welcome From the Head of Department

I am very pleased to introduce this new issue of our Alumni Newsletter, devoted mainly to the series of alumni events which the English Department has held in the past year. These events, linked by the theme of 'Literature Seen, Heard and Spoken', were interdisciplinary in their approach, drawing on panel discussions, lectures, workshops, exhibitions and musical performances to explore ways in which literature interacts with image, music and the spoken word.

Each event had its own focus: December's one was Milton, March's was Shakespeare, and June's was 'Literature and Song'. One of the most pleasing aspects of these occasions was the opportunity to catch up with so many of you. We would like to thank UCL Futures and the Faculty of Arts and Humanities for their generous support which allowed us to employ a part-time events co-ordinator, John Morton. John, I'm sure you'll agree, did a wonderful job, and we wish him all the best for the lectureship to which he has been appointed at the University of Greenwich.

Next year we have another exciting event planned for alumni. This event will take place in March and will focus on Bloomsbury (coinciding with the final year of the Bloomsbury Project, based in this Department and the Wellcome and co-led by Rosemary Ashton). We'll be sending you further details of this event in due course.

I hope you enjoy reading about our activities in this newsletter. As well as an overview of this year's events, you will find notices of publications and two other pieces, one by Rene Weis on playing King Lear in a film and one by a recent alumna Kumiko Toda on her on-line literary magazine. Do keep in touch with us, through either our website or personal contact, and I look forward to seeing as many of you as possible next year.

*Professor Susan Irvine*

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## Literature and Song 12th June 2009

For the first session of 'Literature and Song', we were delighted to welcome back Danny Karlin, formerly a professor in UCL's English Department and now Professor of English at the University of Sheffield, to give an opening lecture on the topic of 'Hark! Nineteenth-Century Poetry and the Song of Birds'.

Expectations were high for this lecture – Danny's formidable scholarly and teaching abilities being known to many alumni as well as his former colleagues – and yet the extent of its virtuosic breadth and depth surprised and delighted us all.

Nightingales and larks, it seems, inspired many a nineteenth-century poet to imaginative heights (some, as Danny acknowledged, more successfully than others!).

Danny offered us characteristically perceptive readings of an array of poems in which the song of birds plays a significant part, and some of the most curious examples related to the process of turning sound into text.

We saw and heard how poets had attempted to create poetry out of a transcription of bird-song: the 'Sweet! Sweet!' and 'Joo! Joo!' of the skylark for Walter Garstang, and the 'chee chew' and 'jug jug jug' of the nightingale for John Clare.

Danny's brilliant reinterpretation of Walt Whitman's 'Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking' in relation to the idea of bird-song evolving into the written word was a fitting climax to a lecture which challenged and changed our perceptions of how literature and song might interact and harmonise.

From nineteenth-century poetry to medieval song ... we were then treated to the rich and evocative voice of Angus Smith, a tenor and a member of the Orlando Consort, one of Britain's most important early music ensembles.



Danny Karlin takes on Shrek and the Song of Birds

Angus performed with extraordinary skill and versatility a medley of medieval songs, ranging from their earliest survival in English (Godric) to the high art of French song (Machaut).

As well as offering spellbinding renderings of rarely performed songs, Angus discussed aspects of interpretation and performance with Ardis Butterfield, a Reader in English at UCL and herself an expert on medieval song.

The audience was given fascinating insights into how experimental and innovative one needs to be in interpreting medieval song for modern performance, given that decisions on the type of sound, dynamics, how emotively to sing and whether or not to use instruments are far from straightforward. The textual idiosyncrasies of 'Byrd one brere', the fluidity of 'Angelus

ad virginem' (surviving in several versions across three centuries in both pious and impious contexts!), and the highly crafted quality of a Machaut lai were perceptively explored in relation to performance.

Through a wonderful selection of manuscript images of songs presented on the page, points were raised about the way song becomes text, throwing different perspectives on issues which Danny had raised in his lecture.

An exquisite heart-shaped image of a song by Baude Cordier from the Chantilly Codex provided particularly clear evidence of how the visual representation of song evolved into an art form in its own right. For sheer artistry surely only Angus's performance of medieval songs can compare.

**Susan Irvine**

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After a tea break, with an exhibition of musical curiosities organised by UCL Special Collections, the evening ended with a lively session on the role of song in fiction, featuring the novelists Ali Smith and Susie Boyt (an alumna of the MA in Anglo-American Literary Relations).

I began by asking Ali and Susie whether they shared Nick Hornby's view that no one becomes a writer until they've given up all hope of becoming a rock star.

Neither of them held rock star ambitions, though Susie admitted to a childhood desire to perform in musical comedies; Ali doesn't like the idea of performing but has written quite a few songs for others to sing, including a 2007 Trashcan Sinatras song, 'Half an Apple', and a Jacques-Demy-inspired musical called *The Switch* for Radio 3. She's recently completed another, *The Good Liar*, with the composer Nicky Haire.

We talked about the different ways that Ali and Susie use song in their fiction. Susie likes to create a self-contained world and so makes up the songs or even snatches of songs that her characters hear.

These range from the theme to a medical soap opera in *Only Human* (2006) to those performed by a band called All Mod Cons in *The Character of Love* (1996).

Ali, on the other hand, prefers to use real songs in her novels, songs which often function as a kind of ghostly connective tissue between people. Perhaps the purest expression of this is at the end of *Hotel World* when Dusty Springfield's 'The Look of Love' soars 'sure and broken, definite and tentative' through the window of a terraced house.

Finally it comes to its 'fragile cheap crescendo... as the three minutes thirty seconds of song (and behind it all the two-minute, three-minute songs



The event reaches its crescendo with Susie Boyt, Ali Smith and Kasia Boddy

there have ever been about the comings and goings, the gains and the losses, the endless spinning cycles of love and the trivia of living) come...to a close.'

Someone asked whether writing about song evoked emotions in the novelists.

Ali was keen to distinguish her characters' musical tastes (and emotions) from her own. For Susie, it was a bit different since her latest book, *My Judy Garland Life* (2008) is, in her own estimate, 'one part memoir, two parts hero-worship and three parts biography with a dash of sequin studded self help thrown in'.

This led us to Judy Garland's dish-washing sequence from the Jerome Kern biopic, *Till the Clouds Roll By*, and her Trolley Song from *Meet Me in St Louis*. I chose the third track, ABBA's 'The Day Before You Came'.

From trolley cars and commuter trains, we continued the transport theme with Ella Fitzgerald singing 'A Tisket A Tasket' on a bus.

Ali pointed out how odd the whole set-up was: a best-selling song that all's about colours (red, blue, even cerise) yet does not mention black or white, the colours that would have made it impossible for Ella to move so freely about a bus in the early 1940s.

As time was running out, we concluded then with a rousing sing-along version of that modernist classic of alternating narrative perspectives, 'Summer Nights'. By all accounts, everyone enjoyed at least one sweet from our pick 'n' mix; and if you follow this link: [www.ucl.ac.uk/english/alumni/song.htm](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/english/alumni/song.htm) you can find a fuller account of the evening session, including details of some of the clips we didn't have time to show.

**Kasia Boddy**

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## Shakespeare: Words and Performance 6th March 2009

This was the second in the English Department's series of events on the theme of 'Literature Seen, Heard and Spoken', generously supported by UCL Futures and the Arts and Humanities Faculty.

A diverse and animated group of alumni, students, staff and friends gathered to hear a fascinating panel discussion on Shakespeare in performance, led by the distinguished Shakespeare scholar and director Professor John Russell Brown, who is an Honorary Visiting Professor of the English Department.

Joining him were James Hutchinson and Sally Leonard, two alumni who have pursued careers on the stage after notable successes as student actors. It was a pleasure to welcome them back to UCL, and to hear their stimulating debate about the relative merits of head and heart in preparing for a Shakespearean role.

Over tea, guests enjoyed an exhibition of rare Shakespeareana from UCL Special Collections. Next came a second panel, chaired by René Weis, on working with Shakespeare's texts.

The speakers included Stanley Wells, editor of the Oxford Shakespeare and former director of the Shakespeare Institute (and another UCL alumnus), who was about to create headlines with his announcement of the discovery of a possible Shakespeare portrait.

His fellow panellists were Professor Ann Thompson (editor of the recent *Arden Hamlet*), Henry Woudhuysen, and myself, feeling privileged but also slightly daunted to be alongside such eminent scholars.



Possibly the only portrait of Shakespeare painted while he was still alive

They all spoke illuminatingly about the fascinating processes of editing, while I used a poem which has provoked an attribution debate as an illustration of the persistent desire to bring Elizabeth I into Shakespeare's story.

The event also included a theatre workshop for local sixth-form students.

It concluded with a reception during which Louise Kemeny, a gifted young singer who graduated from the English Department last year, entertained us with an exquisite performance of settings of Shakespearean songs.

As with the Milton event in December, this was a wonderful opportunity to catch up with old friends and make new ones. It was a great pleasure to share our literary knowledge and interests, and to celebrate the talents and expertise of the wider UCL English community. John Morton and his team are to be congratulated on another great success.

**Helen Hackett**

## 'Milton 400' 5th December 2008

'Milton 400', the first alumni event of the academic year 2008-9, took place in December to commemorate the four hundredth anniversary of the birth of John Milton.

It was extremely well attended, by staff and alumni, and also by sixth-form students from local schools (including one where *Paradise Lost* is taught by a UCL alumna) for whom Sharon Morris of the Slade School of Fine Art ran a workshop on 'Milton and Art'.

The festivities began with a panel session, at which Milton's most recent biographer, Dr Anna Beer (Kellogg College, Oxford), and two distinguished critics specialising in Milton, Dr Sharon Achinstein (St Edmund Hall, Oxford) and Dr Karen Edwards (Exeter University) introduced aspects of the topic 'Milton and Education'.

Dr Beer vividly reconstructed Milton's own education at St Paul's School and Christ's College, Cambridge (where, like many another great poet, he found the curriculum deadly dull) and his theory and practice as an educator in the early 1640s.

Dr Achinstein then argued that Milton undertook in his prose and verse writings to train English readers as authentic (republican) citizens.

Finally, Dr Edwards examined the significance of the early-modern habit of personifying Grammar as a woman for Milton's thinking about pedagogy.

Matters of gender remained to the fore in the round-table discussion (convened by Dr Davis) which followed, during which the three speakers fielded questions from the audience.

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Debate particularly heated up – to a suitably impassioned Miltonic pitch – over what role Milton assigned to pleasure in the proper acquisition of knowledge!

The break which came next showed how pleasure and pedagogy can be combined.

There was refreshment for the body in the form of tea and coffee – and a birthday cake for Milton, resplendently iced in sky-blue and baked by Susie Boyt.

Improvement for the mind came in the form of an exhibition of Milton volumes put on by UCL Special Collections, including a first edition of *Paradise Lost*.

The topic for the second panel session was 'Milton and Influence', with papers from three of the department's professors: Mark Ford, Rosemary Ashton, and Philip Horne.

Professor Ford, telling the story of Milton's impact on early efforts to write the epic of America, concluded (gloomily, Bloomily) that it was not until American poets – most notably Walt Whitman – asserted their independence from the overpowering precedent of *Paradise Lost* that their national literature began to come into being.

Professor Ashton took the audience on an expertly guided 'whistle-stop tour' of the potentially endless terrain of Romantic Miltonism, in twenty minutes (or rather a handful of her famous notecards!).

And Professor Horne judiciously sampled the history of Milton's presence in modern literature, from



John Mullan makes a wish on Milton's cake

(guess who?) Henry James to the present-day English poet who in recent volumes such as *Scenes from Comus* and *A Treatise of Civil Power* has been engaging ever more explicitly with Milton and who, in his serious combativeness and insistence on the public dimension of the poet's task, may indeed be considered Milton's heir today – Geoffrey Hill.

Proceedings concluded with drinks and a finger buffet, during which a specially commissioned setting of Milton's early lyric poem 'On May Morning' was performed for the first time.

**Paul Davis**

**The next alumni event will be on the theme of Bloomsbury, to coincide with the public launch of the 'Nineteenth-Century Bloomsbury' project. The event will take place in March 2010; more details will be sent out in due course.**

**If you have any queries please email [c.szembek@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:c.szembek@ucl.ac.uk)**

## Life Goes on

On Sunday 17 May 2009, somewhat to my amazement, I found myself playing King Lear in *Life Goes On*, a film directed by Sangeeta Datta.

Her son Soumik, Harrovian, painter, and actor had once been my tutee. While at UCL, he starred as the MC in the Bloomsbury's acclaimed production of *Cabaret*, directed by Fiona Morrell, another English student.

After graduating, Soumik gained a place at RADA, but chose instead to concentrate on the Sarod, a legendary stringed instrument widely used in northern Indian classical music.

Now, still only in his twenties, Soumik Datta appears regularly in concerts all over Europe and Asia.

A few months ago I went to hear him perform. His playing was haunting and soulful, as bewitching as the sounds of the Ganges lapping against the temple steps at Benares.

Later that night Soumik invited me to play Lear in his mother's film: he would be doing the soundtrack. How could I refuse? Then, on the way home, I panicked. I had last acted over 30 years earlier, and I had never been in a film.

Mine was a cameo Lear, three bit scenes of an inset student production in which the film's heroine takes on the role of Cordelia.

In real life she is the Bollywood star Soha Ali Khan. After Balliol College Oxford, followed by graduate work at the LSE and a spell as a stockbroker in Mumbai, she turned to acting. She has not looked back. In the film she plays Dia, the youngest daughter of Sanjay, a highly esteemed GP who

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suddenly finds himself a widower with three grown-up daughters.

While trying to come to terms with the loss of his wife, he is hurt to the core when he discovers that Dia, his favourite child, has a Muslim boyfriend.

Sanjay, acted by the famous Indian playwright, actor, and director Girish Karnad, is intensely conscious of the post-partum sorrows of partition and its cataclysmic impact on his family.

But his British-born daughters see the world very differently. Theirs are the concerns of modern London women who happen to be Asian, hence their wrestling with pregnancy, marriages under strain, same sex longings, a far cry from the events of 1947.

Above all, they are at ease with cultural differences, Hindu and Muslim in this case, in ways unimaginable for their parents. In the end the film, though tense, is inclusive, big-hearted, and forgiving.

I wonder whether my performance will find forgiveness, assuming any of it survives the cutting floor? 'Will you tell your students?' Goneril (Sarah Whitehouse) and Regan (Sophie Alderson) asked me, more than once. They and the young men who played France and Burgundy, though barely out of drama school, were impressively professional.

The week before filming we were put through our paces by Alison Kingsley, an experienced director with a great eye for choreography and a wonderful ear for verse.

I learnt more from her about speaking Shakespeare on stage than I had ever imagined possible. Then we were on. It was as scary as it was exhilarating, and it really did last all day.

*Life Goes On* will be submitted to the London Film Festival 2009.

**René Weis**



A still from *Life Goes On*

Photo © Vipul Sangoi

### **The Literateur** **An Online Literary Magazine** **[www.literateur.com](http://www.literateur.com)**

*noun.* 1. One who is almost obnoxiously acquainted with literature and takes care to frequently remind you of the fact.

As literary journalism is a notoriously difficult world in which to get a foothold, I decided that the quickest and best way to start going beyond the odd 500 word review would be to start my own literary magazine.

After dragging in two other literateurs as eds and an expression of eternal gratitude to a website wizard, the cogs of *The Literateur* began to whirr.

Due to a happy mixture of luck, contacts and sheer bolshiness, *The Literateur* managed to somehow rustle up a rather impressive array of interviewees for the first issue.

Andrew Motion talked about retiring from the laureateship, our very own Mark Ford delighted readers with his line of dry humour, and Prof. Stanley Wells chatted about everything from his days as a schoolmaster to his championing of the Cobbe portrait of Shakespeare (see pg 4).

Issue 2 looks to be equally exciting with a fantastic break in the shape of two exclusive new poems by Simon

Armitage and an interview with the academic superstar (and former Lord Northcliffe Professor at UCL) Sir Frank Kermode. The involvement of more literary luminaries are under discussion and soon to be confirmed.

*The Literateur* is, however, much more than just big names. Articles in the first issue include, amongst others, an academic but accessible essay on Dystopian literature and a more light-hearted piece about the very guilty pleasure of reading *Twilight*. As for book reviews, we keep them snappy and incisive; a whistle-stop tour around the latest literary releases.

The poetry and short stories sections have proved better than we could have hoped for. There are few things more excruciating than bad creative writing but happily, all those that made the final cut are works with which *The Literateur* is proud to be associated.

I particularly recommend Oli Hazzard's brilliant poem 'Contagious Fire' and Anna Towers' unsettling and surreal story about a man who is literally falling apart.

We are always happy to hear from those who wish to get involved in any capacity, so don't hesitate to email at [editor@literateur.com](mailto:editor@literateur.com).

**Kumiko Kit Toda (Graduate of UCL Department of English, 2008)**

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### Notices

Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy* is one of the most influential literary works of the Middle Ages and was translated into Old English in the ninth century.

In the first new edition in over a century, **Susan Irvine and Malcolm Godden's** *An Edition of the Old English Versions of Boethius's De Consolatione Philosophiae*, 2 vols. (Oxford University Press, 2009) brings together the original prose version and, for the first time, the second prose-and-verse version.

It includes a Modern English translation of both versions, full editorial introduction, detailed commentary, textual notes, and a glossary.

**Helen Hackett** recently published *Shakespeare and Elizabeth: the Meeting of Two Myths* (Princeton UP, 2009).

Did William Shakespeare ever meet Queen Elizabeth I? There is no evidence of such a meeting, yet for three centuries writers and artists have been provoked and inspired to imagine it.

*Shakespeare and Elizabeth* is the first book to explore the rich history of invented encounters between the poet and the Queen, and examines how and why the mythology of these two charismatic and enduring cultural icons has been intertwined in British and American culture.

**Mark Ford** has recently edited three collections of poetry: *Selected Poems by Frank O'Hara*, (Knopf, 2008); *Collected Poems, Vol. 1 (1956-1987)* by John Ashbery (Library of America, 2008); and *Allen Ginsberg: Poems Selected by Mark Ford* (Faber & Faber, 2008).

**Ardis Butterfield's** book *The Familiar Enemy* is forthcoming with Oxford University Press. It re-examines the linguistic, literary, and cultural identities of England and France within the

context of the Hundred Years' War. During this war, two profoundly intertwined peoples developed complex strategies for expressing their aggressively intimate relationship. This special connection between the English and the French has endured into the modern period as a model for Western nationhood.

The book reassesses the concept of 'nation' in this period through a wide-ranging discussion of writing produced in war, truce, or exile from the thirteenth to the fifteenth century, concluding with reflections on the retrospective views of this conflict created by the trials of Jeanne d'Arc and by Shakespeare's Henry V.

It considers authors writing in French, 'Anglo-Norman', English, and the comic tradition of Anglo-French 'jargon', including Machaut, Deschamps, Froissart, Chaucer, Gower, Charles d'Orleans, as well as many lesser-known or anonymous works.

Ardis has recently founded the Medieval Song Network, together with Helen Deeming. More detail are available here: [www.music.sas.ac.uk/research-groups/medieval-song-network.html](http://www.music.sas.ac.uk/research-groups/medieval-song-network.html)

**Kasia Boddy** recently edited *Let's Call the Whole Thing Off: Love Quarrels from Anton Chekhov to ZZ Packer* (Penguin, 2009), with Sarah Wood and Ali Smith.

A deliciously different celebration of love, the book shows that romance is all about having a good row (and not always having to say you're sorry).

From trivial everyday quarrels, such as a dispute over a bride's new hat in Dorothy Parker's 'Here We Are' and an argument about whether to close the screen door in Lydia Davis's 'Disagreement', to more serious arguments where the truth is in doubt, such in Raymond Carver's 'Intimacy', relationships of every kind - devoted, comfortable, passionate, intimate, bad-tempered - are here.

**Bas Aarts** recently organised the Third International Conference on the Linguistics of Contemporary English (ICLCE3) (July 2009).

This included a one-day symposium to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Survey of English Usage, with a keynote address by Professor David Crystal.

More details can be found here: <http://ies.sas.ac.uk/events/conferences/2009/ICLCEthree/>

**Hugh Stevens** has recently completed editing *The Cambridge Companion to Gay and Lesbian Literature*, which will be published in 2010.

The volume contains essays on a wide range of themes relevant to lesbian and gay culture, including the closet, transgender identities, legal trials, and psychoanalysis, as well as essays on literary topics including lesbian and gay love poetry, New York's literary scene, and literary engagements with the past.

**Kathleen Palti**, a recent PhD graduate at UCL, won the newly inaugurated *Medium Ævum* postgraduate essay prize in 2007 for her article 'An Unpublished Fifteenth-Century Carol Collection: Lincoln College, Oxford, MSLat. 141<sup>1</sup>'. This was published in the journal in 2008. For more details see: [http://mediumaevum.modhist.ox.ac.uk/society\\_prize.shtml](http://mediumaevum.modhist.ox.ac.uk/society_prize.shtml)

**Paul Davis** recently published *Translation and the Poet's Life: The Ethics of Translating in English Culture, 1646-1726* (OUP, 2008). *The Review of English Studies* called this book 'a learned and finely distinguished contribution to the succession of critical examinations of Augustan verse translation'.

The Department's Graduate journal **Moveable Type** goes from strength to strength; the most recent issue includes an article by Derek Attridge. Find it here: [www.ucl.ac.uk/english/graduate](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/english/graduate)