

Tricia King

President, Master, Graduates and Graduands, Guests, and Colleagues:

Today, I have the delightful task of welcoming Tricia King as a Fellow of Birkbeck, in gratitude for her extraordinary achievements during her time in our College, and in particular, her dedication to our unique mission.

It is not easy to sum up in a few words the exceptional woman we have before us today. Perhaps, if she will allow me, I want to draw on a woman that King herself mentions as being an inspiration: Boadicea. Of course, I am not referring to the Boadicea of history – that Warrior Queen did not have a happy life or death. Rather, I am referring to the Boadicea of myth: the Boadicea immortalized in Thomas Thornycroft’s bronze statue that has been facing up to Big Ben and the Palace of Westminster since 1902. This is the Warrior Woman draped in a flowing gown, grasping a spear, and riding on a scythed chariot drawn by two rearing horses. This is the Boadicea of the militant suffragettes of the early twentieth century – a beacon of bravery and female strength: feisty, determined, talented, generous. This is the Boadicea who leads from the front, beckoning lesser mortals to follow her.

Tricia King has gone to battle many times for Birkbeck. Although “King” by name, she is a Queen by nature, who, in the 11 years she spent at Birkbeck, promised students and staff, alumni and allies, that life can be transformed through education.

Her route towards us was long. Her parents were Irish immigrants. She was born in Enfield and, although she grew up in North London, there is always a place in her heart for North Kerry. She was a shy child, only really coming out of her shell when she went to study English at York University. She then drifted into her first professional job as a PR officer for Sun Life Canada, a life insurance company with the slogan “Life’s brighter under the sun!” She escaped a few years later to the even brighter lights of the West Yorkshire Playhouse in Leeds and other theatres. These were jobs that appealed to what had become a dramatic, larger-than-life personality. She was part of that revolution in marketing that included the shift from manual typewriters to the internet, and the professionalization of PR and development.

Higher Education claimed a place in her heart when she was appointed marketing manager at the York branch of The College of Law. There, she recruited students on to the legal practice course and facilitated communication and sponsorship between the university and law firms. She did the job so well that the College of Ripon and York St John snapped her up

as their head of marketing in July 2000. However, the College (a Church of England voluntary institution) was in crisis and required major restructuring and disposal of property if it was to survive. King became Principal Dianne Willcocks' "partner in crime" – working hard to save the college. It was a formidable task, involving, for one, the closing of the Ripon campus. Students, staff, local dignitaries, the press, and the Church needed to be convinced or, at the very least, appeased. King and the Principal were accused of destroying civilization and threatened with being "delivered to the village ducking stool". Little things – such as the moving of an organ, pipe by pipe – were to have big consequences. The end effect, though, was to transform the College into the vibrant York St John University. All of this happened within only 6 years.

From there, there was a stint at the University of Roehampton, before she found her true love: Birkbeck. King worked tirelessly at Birkbeck for 11 years, in the roles of Director of External Relations and pro-vice-master of Strategic Engagement and Recruitment. Her job was to raise the profile of the College, as well as to spread our key mission: that is, the transformative power of education for everyone, but especially non-traditional learners. In order to do this effectively, King needed a keen grasp of strategy, an instinctive sense of future trends, and an acute sensibility.

She also needed to be a compelling storyteller, putting into words the often inchoate desires, ambitions, and loyalties of students and alumni. She needed to persuade the media that we were interesting. She needed to resist the machinations of governmental policies which seemed hell-bent on destroying university life and, in particular, the aspirations of part-time students.

King proved talented in spinning a "golden thread" around Birkbeck: drawing in new students, ensuring that they got the highest level education, and then encouraging them to remain loyal to our College, whether by supporting us financially through donations or simply by "spreading the word". Crucially, she recognized that student recruitment, business engagement, alumni relations, fundraising, media, and communication with governmental representatives were all interlinked – like the different segments of a Terry's Chocolate Orange (that she used to great effect during her first interview for the post at Birkbeck).

But, as had happened at York St John University, she had arrived in the midst of a crisis. This was where (once again) she showed her talent for problem-solving. It was 2007 and the government had just introduced their Equivalent or Lower Qualifications (ELQs) policy. This was HEFCE's devastating news that they would "no longer provide funding... to teach students who are studying for a qualification that is equivalent to, or lower than, a qualification which they have already achieved". With one swoop, 40 per cent of Birkbeck's

funding was removed. Our Boadacia and our Master had a fight for survival on their hands. They responded creatively: lobbying, expanding into social media, establishing links with other universities, developing a campus in Stratford. Birkbeck's students and alumni were brought on-board. They made philanthropic donations; they shared contacts in parliament, HEFCE, and elsewhere.

Then came another wave of crises, over government subsidies of fees for part-time students and then the issue of fees themselves. King stepped up again, ensuring most of all that student voices would be heard even though, as one of her colleagues put it, it was often like "walking through treacle". She was appalled by the government's short-sighted focus on full-time, young students, noting that if the government was really committed to social mobility they needed to pay attention to "second chance mature learners". Very quickly, as King herself admits, she became known as "that woman who goes on about part-time students" – it was an obsession.

But she was also "that woman who understands the need for flexibility in provision". Undergraduate provision needed to be offered as three-year programmes as well as the Birkbeckian four-year tradition. King worked to open up postgraduate studies to Black and Ethnic Minority students, as well as to disabled ones. Restructuring – never a comfortable proposition – was required, and King was "that woman" who helped get the job done with minimal confusion and maximum camaraderie. Crucially, she worked to improve the conversion of enquirers to applicants, and then of applicants to enrolments. The slogan "Birkbeck Changed my Life" became a fact.

Good things don't last forever: for King, it was time for a change. In October 2015, she left us to take up the position of vice president of global engagement for the Council for Advancement and Support of Education (CASE), a not-for-profit association that believes in advancing education to transform lives and society across the globe. King had been a long-time volunteer at CASE, serving as a trustee on their Europe Board of Directors for eight years and as a member of the CASE Communications and Marketing Commission for three years. She had received the CASE Crystal Apple for Excellence in Teaching Award in 2012 and the CASE Europe Distinguished Service Award in 2014. CASE is an obvious new home for King. It also plays to her love of travel, since she will be dividing her time between her beloved London and CASE offices in Washington, Singapore, and Mexico City. It is indicative of her energy to know that when she left, she was replaced by three people.

King always brought with her a steely resolve, a Boadician-like determination to be a strong woman, and support other strong women. She has often spoken about the "glass ceiling double whammy" that creates barriers for both senior women and senior professional practitioners (not the dreaded "non-academic" phrase that she hates so much) in higher education.

But she is also great fun – a Pollyanna figure. She is a fanatical sportswoman, having played rugby for England and Great Britain and worked as the volunteer press officer for the women’s rugby football union. She was Manager of the Great Britain Korfbal squad, played county netball, and supports Harlequin Rugby Club at Twickenham Stoop.

She is the mother of three adult children: Sarah, Alice and Ben. And, I am told, she is simply the most “brilliant mother”.

In her position as Pro-Vice Master for Student Experience, she loves to joke that “any woman who has the words ‘Pro’, ‘Vice’, and ‘Master’ in her title has to have a sense of humour”. Colleagues talk in rapturous ways about her energy, ability to make everyone feel good about their job, and how she always gave junior members of staff opportunities with the highest possible level of support. “She trusted us”, one observed, “and helped us develop”. She also established a culture of celebrating achievements: donuts when something good happened. People love working with her. Her favourite comments include: “It’s hard because it’s hard” and “just because it’s urgent, does not mean it’s important”.

I began this oration by referring to the Warrior Queen, Boadicea, and King is certainly a fighter. But, as you will have noticed, King has a fun side to her – which is why I will leave you with something else: King is also obsessed with Karaoke, leading willing colleagues in hours of singing, and often concluding the evening with “New York New York”, kicking her legs in the air.

But, her go-to tune is “Eternal Flame” by The Bangles (not the Atomic Kitten version). We here at Birkbeck have weathered nearly 200 years of highs and lows. King has been a crucial figure in helping us weather some of the lowest points in our recent history. She has “come and ease the pain”; made “sun shine through the rain”. We are honored to “say her name”:

Tricia King, Fellow of Birkbeck – “burning an eternal flame”.