PRIMATICCIO AND RONSARD AT FONTAINEBLEAU, 1564

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Fontainebleau, created by François Ier as a privileged place of relaxation and divertissement, more than adequately fulfilled this role in the Spring of 1564 when two great artists – Ronsard and Primaticcio – collaborated on an extensive series of *fêtes* designed to entertain Charles IX and his court for 43 consecutive days¹. The abbé de Saint Martin, superintendant of the king's works with a pension of 1,200 *livres tournois*², and Ronsard *prince des poètes* and king's almoner, also recently in receipt of a substantial pension (1,200 *livres tournois*), produced a unique blend of imaginative and virtuosic works.

¹ Details are given in Abel Jouan's Recueil et Discours du voyage du Roy Charles IX, Paris, 1566, reprinted in full in GRAHAM, MCALLISTER JOHNSON 1979, pp. 71-143. For the role played by the king in the Fontainebleau *fêtes*, see my chapter: *Fêtes : religious and political conflict dramatised: the role of Charles IX*, pp. 215-38 in VINESTOCK, FOSTER 2008, pp. 215-238.

² Primaticcio also received 600 *livres tournois* in his capacity as surintendant de la maison de Catherine de Medici; for these details, see CORDELLIER 2008, pp. 229-244.

The first historian of Fontainebleau, le père Dan, highlighted in his Le Trésor de Fontainebleau (Paris, 1642), the decoration of noble rooms appropriate for festivity. The salle de Bal, for instance, adorned with visions of celestial rejoicing, Muses performing, banquets displayed, and gods present in every arcade: «tout le parterre libre pour les Bals et les Balets, et machines»³. The courtyards, too, were fashioned for acts of chivalric celebration: the cour du cheval blanc where père Dan relates: «se font les magnificences des Tournois, où l'on court la Bague, où l'on rompt à la lance et au Faquin, une grande lice et barrière y estant dressée exprez le long de la grande Gallerie»⁴. His account reveals the rich traditions of festival enjoyed at Fontainebleau: the magnificences prepared for the visit of Charles Quint in 1539 which gave Primaticcio his first opportunity to show his remarkable powers; the ceremonies for the birth of the Dauphin in 1543 when a mock castle was erected in front of Le Chenil providing the focus of much knightly endeavour by land and water⁵. The intensity of festival activity in 1564 can be gauged from the correspondence of the king's secretaries who convey the strain on those behind the scenes. Their minds were stretched to the uttermost by: «dix mille sortes de festoiements et gentillesses», and they continued to report in wearied tones the fact that «farces, festoyements et triomphes continuent encore tous les jours»6.

At Fontainebleau, as Brantôme observed, «l'art vient à surpasser Nature»⁷, yet its fantastic décor blended with the beauty of the natural setting. Thus, on the walls and frescoes art vied with Nature while, in parallel mode, poetry and song activated the natural world bringing into being spirits that inhabit waters and

³ DAN 1642, pp. 99-108, description of the salle de Bal.

⁴ Ibid., p. 33.

⁵ Ibid., pp. 218-223.

⁶ Cited in BOUTIER, DEWERPE, NORDMAN 1984.

⁷ Brantôme 1864-1882, III, p. 125.

forests – nymphs, naiads, orcades – who speak in the same manner as the sirens and Neptune who addressed Charles IX the day before *Mardi Gras*, from the fountains and canals in the surroundings of the château⁸.

Although, in writing about possible collaborations between artists of different generations (Primaticcio born 1504, Ronsard in 1524), it behoves us to be cautious, there are undoubtedly similarities of inspiration and performance. Primaticcio's ideas echo in Ronsard's verse where his evocations reflect the elegant, sinuous forms the artist created; figures, masques, thermae, strange creatures only half human crowd around Primaticcio's frescoes and reappear to speak in the poet's lines. The work of both artists blurred fiction and the real; mythology cloaked the everyday, and clouded the perception of their audience who, like Brantôme, saw *Le Chenil*, for instance, as the palace of Apollo⁹.

For the Fontainebleau *fêtes* of 1564, Ronsard composed 2,000 lines of poetry¹⁰, and Primaticcio controlled a vast array of «peintres, doreurs, mouleurs, maçons, charpentiers, serruriers et manoeuvres» who laboured everyday from mid January to complete the enormous variety of tasks required since the festivities were scattered across the entire site and included constantly changing forms of celebration¹¹. Both artists, fully in command of every branch of their art, understood the need for diversity and ingenuity, so that while Ronsard invented cartels, challenges, sonnets, interludes, songs, devices, speeches, mascarades, and dramatic eclogues, Primaticcio disbursed the

⁸ This account of the day's entertainment put on by the king's brother was printed separately and reproduced in GRAHAM, MCALLISTER JOHNSON 1979, pp. 147-150.
9 See ADHÉMAR 1958, pp. 344-348.

¹⁰ These were edited by P. Laumonier in RONSARD 1948; he provides a succinct summary of Ronsard's contribution on pp. xiii-xiv of his Introduction. For the most recent study concentrating on the architecture, see CHATENET 2005, pp. 194-203.
¹¹ VASARI 1966-1987, VI, p. 147.

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23,190 *livres tournois*, 1 *sol*, 4 *deniers* on a «grande quantité d'ouvrages... aux triomphes, tournois, comedies, mascarades, festins et autres magnificences que led. Seigneur [Charles IX] a voulu et entendu faire»¹².

The scale of the work was considerable, and its complexity should not be underestimated. It involved all the major musicians of the court as well as the celebrated choreographer Beaujoyeulx – all of whom would accompany the king on his twoyear journey across France. Our chief concern here, however, lies with the principal architects of the fêtes - Ronsard and Primaticcio. First, consider the buildings: in addition to ensuring that the décor of reception rooms, such as the salle de Bal or the salle de la comédie were in pristine condition, the Galerie basse had to be made ready; interestingly, its décor of Muses and the goddesses Venus, Juno and Pallas was to be reflected in the concert and the personages present on February 14th in the banquetting hall of the duc d'Orléans' residence, the walls of which were embossed with devices representing prosperity, vigilance and honour¹³. For the previous day, February 13th, it had been necessary to complete the Queen Mother's retreat - La Vacherie [sometimes called La Laiterie], to prepare it for Ronsard's La Bergerie performed by Charles IX and the young members of his court¹⁴. It had been designed by Primaticcio, and its décor of grotesques was still being applied in January 1564 by Dell'Abate and Antoine Caron, among others¹⁵, while the Zodiac with its twelve signs and elaborate plaster work painted by Frémin

¹² LABORDE 1877-1880, II, p. 102.

¹³ GRAHAM, MCALLISTER JOHNSON 1979 pp. 156-157.

¹⁴ V. Scott and S. Sturm Maddox are the most recent scholars to have argued that *La Bergerie* was indeed performed (SCOTT, STURM MADDOX 2007). For contemporary witnesses of the performance, see CONDÉ 1743, II, p. 191; CASTELNAU 1838, pp. 499-500.

¹⁵ For a discussion of how Primaticcio delegated the carrying out of his artistic ideas to many other colleagues, see CORDELLIER 2008, pp. 241-242.

Roussel were scarcely dry¹⁶. Almost every day barriers, lists and viewing stands had to be erected in the courtyards of the various residences with a temporary building (often a hermitage) for the assembling of knights; the enchanted tower was also required to house the emprisoned damsels; and then, the strong fort built on an island not far from *Le Chenil* had to be made ready for assault.

Machines, too, had to be devised. The triumphal cars which carried Love and Chastity into the hall for the interludes during the performance of Ariosto's *Genièvre*, and that of Neptune which was drawn across the waters by three sea monsters, were familiar sights, reproduced in Antoine Caron's designs for the Valois Tapestries (The Whale), and the idea of which can be found in Primaticcio's drawings : two examples are preserved in Stockholm: Juno's car led by two peacocks, and that of a victorious hero drawn by two slaves¹⁷.

Arms and armour were specially made and of great quality, for the king and his brother, for Cupid's equipment and Chastity's shield. The trophies and gifts offered by Venus, Juno and Pallas after the banquet given by the duc d'Orléans were of rare metal and considerable artistry. Furthermore, astonishing effects were achieved to delight the courtiers. There were rocks which opened magically of their own accord and artificial fountains that spoke and sang. But, the most spectacular of all, mentioned by all witnesses, was the enchanted tower which, after the king and his brother had fought and overcome the giants and released the beautiful damsels, exploded into a thousand flames before being reduced to ashes. Such brilliant illusions were to become almost routine at Bayonne in 1565.

¹⁶ LABORDE 1877-1880, II, p. 66.

¹⁷ Juno is no. 212 in DIMIER 1900; the hero in his triumphal car is reproduced in the exhibition catalogue, *L'Ecole de Fontainebleau* 1972, no. 188.

As far as costume design was concerned, it was - in part - almost as if gods and goddesses with their entourage of nymphs, sirens and tritons had stepped down from the walls of the château¹⁸: as suggested earlier, Juno, Pallas and Venus emerge from their places in the Galerie basse to present gifts at the end of the duc d'Orléans banquet¹⁹. In addition, however, the lavish outfits of the knights had to be designed, for intricate and magnificent garments were the essential preliminaries of every spectacle. All the knights were required to complete the circuit of the lists to show off their glorious clothes - «faire leur monstre», as the chroniclers described it. Whether masquerading as chevaliers contents or malcontents, Greeks or Trojans, or disguised as ladies, each knight's garment was clearly marked and differentiated with embroidered or painted personal devices²⁰. Heralds, dwarfs and giants, as tradition demanded, were also present, although the many devils and evil spirits who invaded most shows introduced a discordant note. These were the representatives of a world of disorder and, as such, had to be overcome and controlled by the civilising power of the new French monarch and his superior force.

The Court's sojourn at Fontainebleau in 1564 lasted from January 31st to March 13th, and the significance of the *fêtes* went well beyond the mere entertaining of courtiers and their ladies. The Spring of 1564 had marked a lull in the devastating internicene struggle between catholics and protestants, and brought the government's accommodation with the rebel leader - the prince de Condé who played a sparkling and enlivening role in all the tournaments and mascarades, as Ronsard emphasized in a series of sonnets honouring the major participants. Condé lights up

19 See CORDELLIER 2004, figures 56, 57, & 60.

¹⁸ For information on Primaticcio's costume designs, see Dimier, catalogue cit., (1900); DAHLBACK 1956, pp. 397-404; HALL 1976, pp. 353-77; OCCHIPINTI 2001, pp. 239-249, and CORDELLIER 2004, pp. 120-36.

²⁰ CASTELNAU 1838, pp. 499-500, where he describes the knights as fighting «avec des dards et grands pavois où estoient despeintes les devises de chaque combatant».

the court, the poet claimed, «La reveillant de masques et d'alarmes»²¹. It was a fragile interlude between wars, feeding the desire for more permanent peace and which was to give Ronsard's poems a particular urgency and poignancy.

A time of rebirth, Spring 1564 also celebrated the majority of the young king Charles IX, come of age, ready to take counsel and to take command in his kingdom. The *fêtes* were the first opportunity when Charles, as king, could take centre stage²².

The political importance of the festivities was underlined by the fact that ambassadors were called to Court to witness the celebrations. On 3rd February, ambassador Smith reported that both the king and queen had desired his presence assuring him that the Provost of Melun had been ordered to ensure that he should want for nothing; and, a fortnight later, he wrote to Lord Burghley about the skilful performances at the tilt by Condé, the duc de Nemours and Comte Rhingrave²³.

In tracing the major themes developed at Fontainebleau, scholars have emphasised the unity of thought which inspired Ronsard and Primaticcio, Adhémar argued that Ronsard knew the place well and had direct access to Primaticcio's work and that, as a consequence, his verses were imbued with the spirit of the artist. Ménager shared the responsibility between them, attributing inspiration equally as «une connivence entre la pastorale (of Ronsard) et le décor maniériste (of Primaticcio)»; while Cordellier underlines the grace and suppleness found in the work of both²⁴. The themes they exploited were well established: a blend of chivalric traditions renewed in the romances of Ariosto and Tasso; continuing beliefs in the power of the supernatural; and

²¹ RONSARD 1948, XIII, p. 242, l. 12. The sequence of sonnets is at pp. 240-54 where the sonnet, p. 243, ll. 14-15 focuses on Condé's chivalric prowess.

²² On Charles IX as «chef d'orchestre», see my chapter cited in note 1 above.

²³ Calendar of State Papers, Foreign, Elizabeth, 1564-5. nos. 2, 12 & 13, on 3rd, 12th and 13th February.

²⁴ ADHÉMAR 1958; MENAGER 1979, pp. 344-352; and CORDELLIER 2004, p. 25.

visions of the golden age inherited from Virgil, Theocritus and others.

Two preoccupations were, however, dominant - lessons in kingship, accompanied by martial prowess and, in stark contrast, experience of the blessings of peace. The aspirations for peace, the fruits of tranquillity and prosperity are reserved for the songs of the sirens and Neptune and for the sentiments dramatically expressed in La Bergerie where the young princes perform their pastoral idyll as shepherds and listen to the wise model - Henri II, and to the sage advice that counsels peace and moderation. Although the serious tone of instruction dominates the Bergerie, the sonnet sequence, and all the songs, it has to be remembered that the exemplar, Henri II, was of martial temperament, a military monarch. His son, Charles IX, inherited his father's love of heroics, and his courtiers catered for this taste by entertaining him with castle stormings, tourneys, tilts, running at the ring and other feats of arms. At Dijon, for example, Tavannes arranged such a medley at the end of May for the king's divertissement²⁵, and observors remarked that such displays were virtually routine pastimes as can be seen from the ways the maréchal de Vieilleville filled his leisure hours at his country retreat, Durestal, in 1563²⁶.

Certainly, long sections of Abel Jouan's account of the events at Fontainebleau are devoted to detailed descriptions of the blows struck between the knights, of their nature and number²⁷, and – of course – when it came to the king and his brother, their efficacy (despite the fact that we know from Brantôme that their overpowering of the giants guarding the enchanted tower – performed by the two fencing masters Silvio and Pompey - was

²⁵ TAVANNES 1838, p. 277; he had celebrated the birth of a son in similar fashion in 1541, *ibid.*, p. 149.

²⁶ VIEILLEVILLE 1938, p. 353.

²⁷ JOUAN 1566, in GRAHAM, MCALLISTER JOHNSON 1979, p. 76; and for an even fuller account in the description of the events of the 14th February, ibid., p. 146.

mere simulation)²⁸. Thus, the artists had two diametrically opposed subjects to embroider upon.

Although no specific designs by Primaticcio survive for all these activities, it is possible to reconstruct their appearance in a variety of ways. First, it should be noted that both artists used the same sources such as Ovid's Metamorphoses29. But, more particularly, Ronsard's evocations of beings are so powerful and palpably present that they can be matched to Primaticcio's earlier conceptions. The goblet which Navarrin offers in La Bergerie is encrusted with familiar scenes, a satyr in the embrace of a shepherdess around whom play tiny cupids, an idea initially but rather differently worked by Primaticcio, and etched by Léon Davent³⁰. The striding figure of Amor, whose devastating triumph provided one of the interludes to Ariosto's play, captures again the strength of Primaticcio's drawing known also from Androuet du Cerceau's engraving of Le Triomphe de l'Amour³¹. The detailed descriptions in some contemporary accounts of the *fêtes* can serve as guides to the appearance of the performers: the outfits of heralds announcing the opening ceremonies; or the accoutrements of the Greek and Trojan knights, for example, shields and weapons indicating their race³², the form of the Sirens so well disguised that they seemed naked, «et avoit du nombril en bas de grandes queues Dorées, argentées et azurées, et retroussées comme celles des Dauphins»³³. Some characters, although vividly evoked by Ronsard, such as the devils and evil spirits inhabiting the enchanted tower,

Plein de peur et d'effroy, et d'une creinte horrible

²⁸ Brantôme 1864-1882, IV, p. 222.

²⁹ See discussion in CORDELLIER 2004, p. 212 n. 6, where references to the woodcuts of the 1539 edition of the *Metamorphoses* is made, and LEBÈGUE 1960, pp, 301-306.

³⁰ CORDELLIER 2004, cat. No. 82, pp. 203-204.

³¹ Ronsard, la trompette et la lyre 1985, cat., no. 87.

³² Graham, McAllister Johnson 1979, p. 164.

³³ Ibid., p. 147.

De Fantaumes, et d'Esprits et de braziers ardents³⁴,

only realize their full potential in later festivals. We find them again at Bayonne (1565) in the troop of the duc de Longueville; there, they were dressed in long, red velvet robes, covered in gold stars; the signs of the zodiac were embroidered on their scarves. Clouds enveloped their bodies and large wings grew out of their backs³⁵. In fact, although it may seem paradoxical, such was the force of continuity that valuable insights are gained into the creations required from Primaticcio at Fontainebleau by considering other festivals at Charles IX's court.

At Bayonne, dwarfs also played an initiating role in the chivalric contests; they wear long garments with sleeves which trail on the ground. Guard/giants, too, reappear sporting breastplates of gold material mounted upon green silk and fashioned as though made of tiny scales³⁶. More information still relates to the outfit of the king, dressed *à la troyenne* in gold cloth, antiqued, striped in blue with sleeves of white satin streaked with fine gold; a cutaway cape in silver cloth, stockings and boots made of fine gold material which matched the trappings of his horse³⁷.

As Dominique Cordellier has shown, Primaticcio was very protective of his drawings and he supervised the proofs of etchings and engravings made from them. He made many elucidatory comments on them, pointing out the colours and materials to be used in the making of the costumes, and using this way to remind himself of earlier designs. From engravings and etchings then, we and Ronsard learn Primaticcio's ideas. The same attributes belong to the Muses, Calliope and Polymine, in the

³⁴ RONSARD 1948, XIII, p. 215, ll. 18-19, Cartel de l'Hermite.

³⁵ GRAHAM, MCALLISTER JOHNSON 1979, p. 337.

³⁶ Ibid., pp. 334, 335.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 335.

work of both artists, Primaticcio's conception being available in the fine etchings of Léon Davent. Similarly, the roll call of virtues who appear to advise the king in *La Leçon de Carlin* from *La Bergerie* recall those fixed by Primaticcio for the *armoires* in the *cabinet du Roi*. Finally, in attempting to trace ways of visualising the work Primaticcio designed with Ronsard, we should turn to the drawings of Niccolò Dell'Abate and of Antoine Caron. Both artists worked for Primaticcio at Fontainebleau, both creating paintings and grotesques for *La Vacherie* in the early 1560s³⁸. Both have left festival designs which develop themes played out at Fontainebleau in 1564. Dell'Abate's beautiful Siren could refer to any of the major *fêtes* while Caron's drawing for the Whale Tapestry shows both Sirens and Neptune as depicted by Ronsard. Caron's design for three military maskers may also refer to one of the contests at Fontainebleau³⁹.

Both artists and their masters recognized the political, aesthetic and diplomatic value of the Fontainebleau *fêtes*. Ronsard's dedication of the *Mascarades* (which contained all his verses for those events) to Queen Elizabeth in 1565 makes this clear. In his address, he underlines the desired conciliatory effects of such encounters : «pour joindre et unir davantage, par tel artifice et plaisir, nos Princes de France»⁴⁰. The presentation of his book was formally made through the good offices of the French ambassador, Paul de Foix, but already some months earlier, news of Ronsard's achievements had been sent by ambassador Smith to Lord Burghley⁴¹. The poet's intention, in 1565, was not only to pay hommage to Elizabeth and the principal members of her court, but also to publicize those particular French qualities and virtues displayed in festival; with a cer-

³⁸ For Niccolò Dell'Abate, see Béguin, Piccinini 2005; for Antoine Caron, see Ehrmann 1986.

³⁹ Stockholm, Nationalmuseum, C. 17: 155.

⁴⁰ RONSARD 1948, XIII, p. 36.

⁴¹ Calendar of State papers, Foreign, Elizabeth, 1565 (Feb. 16th), p. 217, Smith to Cecil, and (Aug. 23rd), p. 1411, M. de Foix to Cecil.

tain arrogance he aims to inject these onto the English landscape : «que la gallantize et gentillesse des Françoys passe quelquefois en vostre province»⁴². Ronsard spells out the qualities he has in mind in a long *Elégie* addressed to the queen's favourite, Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester. The prowess and strength of French military skills, displayed in the contests between Greeks and Trojans and others in the Fontainebleau *fêtes*, are found again in the English lord whose portrait actively replays the energy and expertise:

Nul mieux que toy sous le faix de harnois Ne sçait combatre aux paisibles tournois, Ou soit en lice, ou soit à la barrière, Lorsque le fer non tranchant fait voller En se rompant mille esclats en l'air⁴³.

The complete courtier emerges as Ronsard alludes to Dudley's passion for music and song and offers proof of extensive knowledge in his performance of many nation's dances.

Nul mieux que toy ne tombe à la cadance, Quand main à main tu guides une dance, Soit decoupant ou les branles Anglois, Ou les Flamans, ou les nostres François, Ou soit balant d'une jambe soudaine Une gaillarde Espagnole ou Romaine, Montrant la greve et le corps bien adroit⁴⁴.

The civilising power of gallantry and good manners are also brought out, the poet doubtless having in mind the elegant exchanges and word play between the *chevalier content* and *malcon*-

⁴² Ronsard 1948, XIII, p. 36.

⁴³ Elégie à Mylord Robert Du-dlé, comte de l'Encestre, in RONSARD 1948, XIII, p. 70.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 71, ll. 195-201.

tent, and the sweet expressions of loyalty and compliment written for performers in mascarades⁴⁵.

The ultimate accolade, however, to Queen Elizabeth was in the recapitulation by Ronsard of the delights of the natural world animated by nymphs, fauns, the god Pan, and other woodland creatures, and their extension – even transfer – from Fontaine-bleau to Britain⁴⁶. Such was the poet's belief in the powers of art to create and transport what was best in nature.

That he attributed more than usual significance to the 1564 *fêtes* emerges clearly from the nostalgic tones of the verses Ronsard wrote for queen Catherine in December of that year:

Quand voirrons nous quelque tournoy nouveau? Quand voirrons nous par tout Fontainebleau De chambre en chambre aller les mascarades?⁴⁷

In a later poem, too, this time addressed to the king, he gives life to the divine banquets with which Primaticcio had covered the walls at Fontainebleau, especially the *Galerie d'Ulysse* and the *Salle de bal*; Ronsard evokes the pleasure and the excitement, the presence of gods at gorgeous tables, and sets into relief the opportunities for display that such scenes offered artists and poets. Primaticcio and Ronsard were both able to give renewed life to celebrated images from the past by finding new reasons for using them.

Hé quel plaisir... Voir au palais les tables solennelles Ainsi qu'au ciel les tables éternelles De Jupiter, quand au palais des cieux

⁴⁵ RONSARD 1948, XIII, pp. 197-203, Envoy à une Damoyselle pour une mascarade, ibid., pp. 207-208.
⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 54, ll. 335-44.

47 Elégie, ibid., XIII, pp. 141-9, ll. 123-155.

Il se marie, ou festie ses Dieux⁴⁸.

Although Ronsard was aware in 1564 that *poésies de cour* were necessarily more diffuse in form and more effervescent than he would have wished, he nevertheless always responded enthusiastically to the exigences of «ceux qui avoient puissance sur moy, lesquels ne trouvent jamais rien de bon, ny de bien fait, s'il n'est de large estendue»⁴⁹. His recompense came with the royal gift of the *Prieuré de Saint-Cosme – les Tours* (March, 1565) where, later that year – in november – he received Catherine de Médicis and her two sons – Charles IX and the duc d'Anjou.

⁴⁸ Chant de Liesse au Roy, in RONSARD 1966, 2 vols., II, pp. 862-6, ll. 79-82.
⁴⁹ CHAMARD 1961, III, p. 40.

Appendix

January 31st – King arrives at Fontainebleau

February 6th, Sunday – Banquet in the connétable Montmorency's lodging

February 10^{th} , Thursday – Banquet given by the cardinal de Bourbon, followed by a *combat* à *cheval* in the courtyard of his residence

February 13th, Sunday – *La Bergerie* given by the queen mother at *La Vacherie*, followed by *festin*, and a play (Ariosto's *Genièvre*) in the *grande salle de Bal*

February 14th, Monday – full day's entertainment given by the king's brother, the duc d'Orléans

water festival banquet with music continuously tournament, Greeks and Trojans collation combat of 6 knights king and his brother overcome giants, and free damsels from the enchanted tower Fireworks

Festin

February 15th, Tuesday – King's entertainment:

tournament in front of *Le Chenil* assault on enchanted tower; prisoners released banquet

March 13th - King's departure

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