Interview: Simon Palfrey, University of Oxford

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Simon Palfrey is Professor of English Literature and Tutorial Fellow at Brasenose College, Oxford. He is the author of several books on Shakespeare: Late Shakespeare: A New World of Words *(1997),* Doing Shakespeare *(2004; revised and extended 2nd edition, 2011),* Shakespeare in Parts *(co-authored with Tiffany Stern, 2007),* The Connell Guide to Shakespeare's <u>Romeo and Juliet</u> *(2012),* Shakespeare's Possible Worlds *(2014),* Poor Tom: Living <u>King Lear</u> *(2014), and the "critical fiction"* Macbeth, Macbeth *(co-authored with Ewan Fernie, 2016). He is also the founding editor (with Ewan Fernie) of Shakespeare Now!, a series of innovative "minigraphs" published by Continuum. Though Palfrey's work is deeply informed by an awareness of the historical and dramatic conditions of Shakespeare's plays in performance, he is perhaps the greatest practitioner of intense "close reading" among all current writers on Shakespeare. I had the chance to sit down with him in early July 2016 – a week after the Brexit vote – in his office at Brasenose College. We discussed his life and work, Shakespeare studies at Oxford, literary criticism as an art form, the nature of Shakespeare's language, and current events. Below is a transcript of that conversation.*

Spiro: What brought you to the study of Shakespeare?

Palfrey: The study of Shakespeare… The very beginning of this was when I was… I grew up in Australia and wanted to get out, and the only way to get out was to get a scholarship to Europe, and the scholarship for that was a Rhodes Scholarship and I had to invent from nothing a research proposal. The first time I went for the Scholarship I wanted to do something with Yeats, an Irish poet, and I didn't get it. I hadn't yet finished my degree; it was a bit premature. And the second time I decided I wanted to go for Shakespeare. And the reason, the single thing which prompted me, was a moment in *The Tempest* which was when the drunks, Trinculo and Caliban are there, and Trinculo says something like, "They say there's but five upon this isle: we are three of them;

if th' other two be brained like us, the state totters." And I just thought it was this incredible, incendiary moment, explosive, and I thought that no one *ever* pays any attention to that. And I thought, "Somehow, there's a different kind of epitome here. There's a different moment from which everything radiates and into which everything enters," and I thought, "I want to explore those kind of energies." So that was the initial impulse to then begin working on the late plays of Shakespeare. So it was that. That was the thing.

Spiro: Was that resonant, personal moment connected to Australia?

Palfrey: I realized… I didn't know at the time. I never linked it to me. It just interested me, and I had, I suppose, a slightly – not aggressive, but slightly – impatient feeling that the whole critical industry was a little bit decorous and it was pre-empted by all sorts of assumptions which were fundamentally political assumptions, and to do with being on the inside.

But it wasn't until a few years ago that I had to write this thing for a book called *Shakespeare and I* which was part of the Shakespeare Now! series that I edit, and I very reluctantly agreed to write an essay, and I had nothing to say. I thought I had nothing to say because most of the people who were writing were writing about the influence of Shakespeare on their youth or going to the theater with their father, this sort of stuff. And I had zero… I hadn't even been to a Shakespeare play when I was in Australia, ever. I didn't go to one until I was in my early twenties. So I thought I had nothing to say about Shakespeare's relationship to me. I thought it was just purely an interest because I enjoyed the plays and it was separate from my life. And I thought there were all sorts of other stuff that I'm more intimately engaged with personally, to do with music or certain novels or whatever.

But, anyway, I began to think about this and began to write about it, and through the act of writing I discovered pretty much what you just said: a kind of very simple identification with these moments which were to do with growing up on the edges, in these sort of liminal… Almost off the map, growing up in Hobart, in Tasmania, which really doesn't exist for most people, and being sort of perfectly happy, lots of friends, but also fundamentally separate within that environment. And there was something about the combination of that, a kind of separate intellectual, imaginative life, within a place that's separate, that attracted me to something about the fierce energy in these excluded moments in Shakespeare.

So that moment in *The Tempest* is one of them. There are other moments, like in *Cymbeline* when Guiderius chucks Cloten's heads down the stream. I just thought it was incredible. He's sending an embassy to his mother! And it was the mix of violence and irreverence that I loved. Or the figure of Autolycus [in *The Winter's Tale*] who I thought… No one has ever really engaged seriously with Autolycus as a genuine, like this kind of vector of all the energies of the play. And I realized, I recognized there was a large degree of autobiography in it. And I actually think that the figure of Caliban was the most important for me. I used to think a lot about the scamels.[1] You know, the scamels which no one knows about? And they don't exist. And I just thought that was perfect, this kind of invented crustacean or something. And I just loved the idea of entering those tiny, forgotten or semi-excluded moments or objects and discovering life in them.

Spiro: Going back through your work, I see that it's always personal. It always has a "This is what I want to do" sort of tone, which some people never take. They just write as if they don't exist. But that's present in *Late Shakespeare*: "This is what I'm going to do, and this is why I think one should do it." But then, coming to things like *Macbeth, Macbeth*, I think, "This is not the way you're taught to write about Shakespeare in school." That's a book which seems saturated with so many of your own preoccupations. It's not autobiography, but it is a deeply personal work of criticism. It's staking new ground with criticism, and all the more wonderfully complicated because it's a collaboration with Ewan Fernie. Is there a manifesto of the personal in your writing? Is it really important to have a distinct voice in criticism?

Palfrey: Is it a manifesto of the personal? That's a complicated question. The answer is complicated because in one sense I could say that it's almost the opposite, in that… What I'm going to say here has to be sort of strategically or rhetorically ironic, so with that caveat I'm going to say what I'm going to say.

So in one sense, I think that what I most want to do is to tap the possibilities in the things that I'm engaging with, and to recover or discover them through acts of imaginative inhabiting. An imaginative inhabiting in which the act of writing is fundamental. It's not that I think things and then write them out. So one of the reasons why we, Ewan Fernie and I, were led into, sort of semi-reluctantly, writing a response to *Macbeth* in the form of a "critical fiction" was that we needed to attain a de-personalized voice, a voice that had something of the… a voice that was able to countenance multiple and often contradictory possibilities. One of the inspirations there was not

fiction – it was fiction, but it was also Kierkegaard, who was a huge influence on that. I've done some critical work on Kierkegaard and Shakespeare and found his work inspiring. I loved and took seriously his polyonymity; I took seriously that as an avenue to truth, and the way in which you can say things, having this sort of subjunctive approach to actuality. That's the crucial modality I think for me, and for Shakespeare that matter: the subjunctive, the sense of "if," or "would," Hazlitt's "would." He's a poet of "would."

And so writing fiction allowed us to inhabit points of view, inhabit bodies, inhabit places, minds, situations that were not simply one's own. In the same way that it's a collaboration also does that. Collaboration allows a third voice which isn't one's own and it's astonishingly liberating because you can countenance fugitive or scandalous or really difficult thoughts and you can take that thought or that possibility to the end. One of our mantras was this idea of going to the end of a thought, which I think criticism almost never does. It euphemizes; it cleans up. So it was that. Now that critical mode could also be seen as, clearly could also be understood as, a sort of disguised way or an occluded or a sort of distributed way of being more fully oneself as well. And I think that's also true, that you can begin to release, and again, discover the multiple staging-posts of one's own responses to a text like *Macbeth* but also to life. So [we were] getting rid of any professional hats in a way and just saying, "I don't recognize myself in a specific 'professional' sense of a kind of decorum where certain things are simply not said, are not permitted."

But at the same time, the alternative is that, Yes, there is a sort of manifesto of the personal. I wouldn't quite use those terms, but I think it's partly to do with my background, actually. You grow up fundamentally without any peers. I mean, I don't mean that… I obviously had football and cricket and had lots of friends and girlfriends. So I was entirely socialized, but my intellectual, imaginative life was private and it was unshared. I had no colleagues, no friends that I had ever shared it with, ever, and so there's some sense in which you're always following some kind of private little flame or being led by that. And it's the same here. So I come to Oxford, and, you know, I don't belong here in any sense. I really don't belong here. I don't feel at one with the place. I feel separate. I enjoy the job and I like the students and all that sort of stuff, and I like the place in lots of ways, but I don't feel, you know, "born to be here." I'm not that. So this is that separateness. And so I feel zero… I feel no pressure to do what others do. I feel no pressure to please others. I don't mean that in an arrogant way. I just don't. But I don't feel pressure. People

don't pressure me. People never try and tell me what to do. I don't know why. [*laughs*] They just don't.

So there's a constitutional, temperamental independence that I have, but there's also a critical thing. It's also to do, as I said before, with trying to do justice to the things that I'm trying to think about. And that, combined with my particular perverse or proud or just whimsical personality, those two things together have led me to do what I've done.

But it applies also to the stuff that Tiffany [Stern] and I did, which is very interesting. It was a very different sort of collaboration. And in some ways that it was a strategic collaboration, in that we liked each other, we were friends and thought, "Why don't we just go out and have a few drinks and discuss what might be possible?" Without really having any idea, but just knowing that we respected each other and thought, "We're different, but we're both kind of young and bright." That was about it. And we went out and we both shared some ideas and came up with the topic at the end of an evening, basically. But it was strategic in the sense that Tiffany had expertise in theater history, I had expertise in kind of reading and thinking about the dramatic moment, and we thought, "That will work."

And so the element of strategy was there, but also there was some really, really interesting way in which you could become someone other, in the act of sharing the act of a sentence, sharing a sentence, which we did, and which is really hard, because Tiffany and I are so different in our approach to language, and our sentences do not resemble each other. So we had to come upon a third way of writing, as with Ewan, but very differently. So it was a way of writing which was kind of pared of my metaphoricity, and the elements of theory and metaphor which infuse a lot of my work, I kind of pared away, but also it developed more pace and a slightly more leaping quality than Tiffany usually has. It made connections and it went beyond the strictly evidentiary. Tiffany's work isn't just that; she makes big leaps as well, speculative leaps. So her mix of historical speculation with my mix of imaginative, critical, hermeneutic speculation creates something different again. Writing something like that collaboratively was in its own way quite as much of a departure from what's normally done as *Macbeth, Macbeth*, in a different way, because of the shared responsibility for every single thought. And people think they can tell who wrote which bit but they're often wrong. They're not always wrong, because Tiffany wrote most of the history stuff, but I wrote some of it. There are quite a few, even the bits where I don't know anything, but

I wrote it! [*laughs*] I don't really mean that, but you know, there are bits where it's her expertise, but then I troped upon that and developed possibilities, there in the history sections. Likewise, not all the interpretive stuff is mine. Tiffany's in there as well.

So there's a personal element to it in the sense of writing something, wanting to think something and make something which hasn't been done before, and wanting to go beyond comfort zones. One of the things I loved about the [*Shakespeare in*] *Parts* book was just the idea of writing this thing about something that doesn't exist. It was wonderful… There's no such thing as a Shakespeare part. They don't exist. We don't know what any of them were. So there's this act of imagination, and I really liked that. And I liked the way in which it was at one and the same time a book of exact and scrupulous historicism, but also an act of pure imagination. And that's what made it liberating, again.

Spiro: I'd like to think about your relationship to the reader. You have made the act of writing and the act of reading almost impossible to distinguish. When I read your writing, it's like I'm listening to you read, which then makes my experience very different, because I start reading you with the same level of attentiveness that you're showing to Shakespeare, and then I read Shakespeare with the same level of attentiveness you show to him. What do you think of your own reader? Do you think about your reader at all? And what do we think about the reader of Shakespeare, if we should at all? But let's start with what you think of your reader.

Palfrey: There isn't a single reader in my mind, and I don't write with the idea of… I don't have a particular face in my mind's eye, or something like that, or even a particular type of person. Although I have done that: I've written the odd thing, a short book on *Romeo and Juliet* [*The Connell Guide to Shakespeare's <u>Romeo and Juliet</u>*] which I wrote especially for sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds. But I found that all I did there was just wrote directly, really, with just a kind of directness. I didn't hold back on any of the ideas. But it varies. I think sometimes I simply want to… There's a silent addressee in my mind that's the true addressee, and that's the addressee that's trying to… That addressee is sort of coterminous with my own questioning. So the implied addressee is that virtualized individual who wants to know what's happening, or wants to know how this works.

I very often feel, in my critical work – and *Macbeth, Macbeth* was the same – often there's this feeling of wanting to reach a destination, and that destination is, as though, the end of a sentence. Or the destination is being able to articulate the point, say. But I very often find the most trustworthy, the most reliably true, to my mind, form of writing and thinking is when that movement from the starting point to the end point is remarkably full of byways and divagations and it's never straight. It involves this kind of parenthetical or sub-clausal thing. It might end up being a long section or it might being quite a short section with lots of bits. When I'm working with a bit of intensity, that's the reader that I'm working with. It's a reader who's almost the same as me, because I don't always know. I don't know how I'm going to get there.

I think there are, broadly speaking, two ways of writing. One is to do the research and work out the thinking and then, as it were, just articulate that. "I'm going to write out my thesis over the next three months and I've done the research." I just can't… I simply can't work that way at all. That's a form of writing where you've got a very clear idea of the reader, and that reader might be an examiner or it might be a bunch of students or whatever, where you're speaking to them, and it's a rhetorical act in that way. That's not how I write.

But having said that, for example, in *Shakespeare's Possible Worlds* I was very clear there that as much as it had lots of bits like you talk about – you're listening to a process of reading, it had a lot of bits like that – I was also very keen in that book because it had a lot of heavy material, and philosophical material, I was very keen to communicate. And so lots of that has been tested in lectures to undergraduates, has been derived from examples that I discovered in class, or students discovered, so that when I say in the little preface to that book that the most important interlocutors were these undergraduate students, that was absolutely true. Even the most apparently complex ideas were spoken, and I wanted to have this quality.

And then, with *Macbeth, Macbeth* also, it was very interesting: one of our basic rules was that everything should be written for the spoken voice. And if when you read it to an audience who have never heard it before and it sounds heavy in the mouth or stilted, then it's wrong. It's got to be inhabitable by the speaking voice. I try to do the same with my critical writing as well, and a lot of people who know me say that about what I've… particularly in the last few years, "It sounded like you talking." I get that a lot, actually.

So there's different levels of it. You get a sort of inward state of trying to discover the thought or work toward the destination, and then there's a secondary process of making the thought clearer and editing and creating a bit more space and thinking, "Who might actually read this?" So for *Macbeth, Macbeth* we had… Our ideal reader was something like a restless seventeen-year-old. I think that was our ideal reader, because that's what we were when we read Dostoevsky. We were restless seventeen-year-olds in the middle of nowhere thinking, "This is amazing." That kind of erotic, metaphysical hunger. Thinking, "There's more to the world. There's more to life." That's our ideal reader. But equally an ideal reader might be… The book has only just come out but we've met a couple of, not elderly so much as "elderly" women, like sixty- or seventy-odd-year-old women who love it and who read with this…

I tell you what: the best reader for that is the completely *unjealous* reader. It's very hard to be an unjealous reader. When you write criticism you know that almost every reader is going to be interested in good ways and bad ways. And it's very hard… I do this, too. I don't read criticism always generously. You might read a book and think, "Can I learn from this?" or "Does it threaten me? Does this challenge me in good or bad ways?" You know what I mean? That way in which you might read slightly defensively. I think that's the bane of the academy is that you don't.... It's hard to be *genuinely* generous, and it's often people who are not totally invested professionally who are the most generous readers. I think for *Macbeth, Macbeth* the ideal reader was the interested but generous reader. We say, "Just relax and don't worry about *Macbeth*. Don't come in here thinking, 'Ah, that's an allusion to Act 3 Scene 4.'"

Spiro: Which is of course what I was doing. I had to learn to stop.

Palfrey: Yeah, yeah. Because it's also that. But the way to discover, the truest way to read that book, is just to allow it. And I think criticism is slightly different… No, I think it's similar in criticism. Because at the beginning of *Doing Shakespeare*, I think… I haven't look at in a while, but in the second edition of that, I think I just said, Let's just imagine that we've never been here before. Let's imagine that these are completely new. Just try to undress yourself of all your presuppositions.[2] I think that's what I try to do when I write. And that's, again, why *Shakespeare in Parts* was so nice, because you can pretend that you're the first readers of these parts. That's a beautiful liberation. And I think that's with students as well, like in school or something, I say, "Forget Shakespeare or the big authority figure."

So all that implies a particular kind of reader who is open and hungry and wanting to discover things. Open, not so much for revelation as – well, maybe to revelation – to discovery or astonishment, or that sort of thing. And maybe also something to do with the experiential nature of… an experiential as opposed to an evidentiary form of criticism as well. I think that's important, where you're trying to make the experience of reading the book closer to the experience of reading or experiencing the play. Because I think that…

I do think that literary criticism – or, say, dramatic criticism, just talking about plays for a minute – I think it's undervalued, and I think its uniqueness is undervalued. I actually don't think it is simply a derivative or second-order kind of creation. I think it's a first-order creation. What I mean by that is that there are ways of realizing meaning and realizing possibility that only criticism can do. So compare it to… Say, with Shakespeare, the performance of Shakespeare is wonderful, can be great, whatever, but there's no way that a single performance of Shakespeare can do what certain forms of criticism can do. There are forms of expressivity and meaning and significance that can only be released, can only be embodied, in an act of criticism, I think. The time you have, the space you have, the ability to return, to draw out, all this sort of stuff. So when I advocate forms of super-close reading, I see this as fundamentally performative, as an alternative form of performance, really. So that again implies a particular kind of reader, or an addressee or an auditor, I prefer these kinds of terms.

Spiro: An actor has to make choices in the moment that a critic doesn't. A critic can return to the same moment ten times.

Palfrey: Yeah, an actor has to make choices in the moment, and also any performer is indentured to time and to linearity. The plays… Shakespeare is constantly trying to find ways of overcoming that, and scrambling time. So criticism can pay attention to that. And it's not just about close reading of individual words; it's about thinking about the whole thing. So I suppose if I had to summarize in terms of literary criticism: the reader is like a really interested witness of a play, but instead of an auditor or spectator in a theater, this person is a sort of auditor-cum-reader-cum-witness-cum-fellow-traveler in a performance, in a critical performance. Not a "critical performance" in the sense of showing off, but a critical performance in the sense of trying to bring it to life, trying to animate it.

Spiro: I was thinking of that, looking back at Tiffany Stern's book *Rehearsal from Shakespeare to Sheridan*. Particularly the moments of rehearsal in Shakespeare, particularly in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*… the rehearsal of a play, if you've ever worked on a play, can be so much more interesting than a performance because a rehearsal is exactly what you're talking about, these moments of trying something on, realizing it, experimenting. When you do make a final choice it should be after you have explored so much.

Palfrey: I think there's all sorts of problems with… I think rehearsal today is very different from then, which is one of Tiffany's main points. I think in terms of performance, what Shakespeare needs is I think we need to break away almost entirely from the model – we won't, I don't think it's possible, but I think it would be really good – if certain theaters just broke entirely from of the model of the two- or three-act performance with a break in the middle, and began to try it, "So how can we actually embody, animate *this scene*?" You would absolutely need to do it over and over again. I did that a bit.

This also relates to the critical challenge here. I think there's a problem with propositional thinking, also, in criticism. What I mean by that is that the idea that the act of reading or the act of writing literary criticism is satisfied by moving toward a proposition: so, "this is the case," or "here is the case," "here is the case." It's not just Shakespeare. Lots of writers are like this, where there's a sort of disjunct between the very reason why literature or plays or poems exist, why they exist, and the idea of a critical proposition. If you could – this is just an obvious point, in a way – if you could speak this particular truth in a proposition, you wouldn't need the thing at all. How can criticism truthfully register that and respect that? Seeing criticism as a way of trying to articulate or discover the life in something, or how something works… How can you do it? Short of a Borgesian repetition of the thing, which doesn't do it anyway, of course.

So *Macbeth, Macbeth* is partly an answer to that, or it's one answer to that. Criticism hasn't really managed very well with *Macbeth*, and there are lots of reasons for that. One is because it has to engage with collateral context, and ignore the… New Historicism and all that didn't really get anywhere with *Macbeth* at all because it had to avoid the existential scandal, the phenomenological difficulty of the play, the experiential challenge of the play. All of this stuff couldn't be faced because it doesn't work through cultural analogy or whatever. It doesn't work. If you try to explain the play through propositions, you end up with counter-propositions, because it's a play which is

built upon chiasmus or paradox as its basic working trope. So it disables criticism, I think, because it's too smart and too close to the difficulty of living.

So one way of getting to that is through the idea of a critical fiction, where you recognize that truth is probational, not propositional. It's an essay in the sense of Montaigne's version of the essay, where you're trying things out, you're testing things, you're tasting possibilities; everything is necessarily unfinished and incomplete. So the act of criticism can be a concatenation of these unfinished moments, or inadequate moments, which then become an attempt to… a kind of repetition of the play's own methods or something. Where we begin to try to explore the way the play works. And it doesn't resolve into a series of statements or propositions.

Then another way of doing that was in my *Poor Tom* book where I, in various ways… I had one mini-chapter which just listed, I can't remember how many, seventy or something statements. Lots of them are self-canceling, but they accumulate as propositions about what Tom is. But Tom is this. He can't be all these things but, of course, he is all these things. So the idea is that the proposition is at one and the same time spoken but ironized or problematized by the accumulation. Or the chapters where I look at the cliff scene and give, whatever, twenty-five ways of blocking it, a single moment, over and over again. The moment of Gloucester's jump: where exactly is Edgar or Tom at that moment? I was thinking there of how Shakespeare writes his scenes with this sort of recursive, recessive, or shuttered way where something happens and then it happens again and again and again in slightly different ways. It's at one and the same time simultaneous and consecutive or something like that. And thinking of how you can have a moment which is happening over and over and over again, so the fact that it happens over and over and over again which *is* its reality, that's the reality of the moment.

That's the reality of the play, isn't it? They're premised upon their own forward repetition. That's the reality of that moment in terms of its trauma, and its existential provocation, in terms of the terror of a son witnessing his father trying to kill himself, and the idea of the impossibility of cognitive shutdown, but the need to. All this stuff. Shakespeare is engaging with this all the time. And then the way it's scripted to *allow* for these possibilities – the generosity of Shakespeare's scripting but also the challenge – where he's constantly again and again and again at crucial moments leaving it up to actors or readers or directors, whoever, to make decisions, but know that every decision is revocable or returnable, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. So what does criticism do

in the wake of that? You can do a Stephen Booth-style thing like with the Sonnets where you accumulate the so-called ambiguities, that's one way of doing it, or you can try and sculpt or shape these possibilities into something which is a kind of cooperative but complementary form, and that's what I've been trying to do. Does that make sense?

Spiro: That makes a lot of sense. I think of Stephen Booth a lot when I read your work, because I often come back to his statement that criticism is "a complex description of a complex object." And he doesn't give you problems that he solves for you, but he begins something for you that you can continue. You see what he's done and you realize one could do this for a long time. I see that as well in your *Poor Tom* book.

Is all this space for life and possibility unique to Shakespeare? You have suggested that other authors do this as well. Or is this one of the very particularly Shakespearean phenomena?

Palfrey: I think that what I'm calling the "generosity of scripting," the invitational nature of Shakespeare's scripting, is unique to Shakespeare in his time and place. I don't think anyone else writes like that. I think there are some anticipations of some of it in Marlowe, but not many really, because I think Marlowe is mainly about the… The meaning is always within the grasp of the charismatic actor in Marlowe. The line between actor and character almost disappears, and his main techniques are things like the aside, where everything is given to the actor and given to the audience. So I think that's very different.

I think the combination in Shakespeare of ellipses, gaps, opacities, lacunae – within the line, between speeches, in the plot in terms of motive, all this sort of stuff – the combination of that, that sort of lacunal kind of script which requires inference on the part of the listener or the reader, that is mixed with the over-determination of all of the signs in Shakespeare. Every single metaphor in Shakespeare is also a pun, a multiple pun; there is not just lexical but grammatical ambiguity everywhere, all over the place. And then the way in which… The main point of the *Possible Worlds* book, the biggest single thing there, was not just Shakespeare's words that are shooting with possibilities but every single instrument he uses is alive, is a kind of language, a kind of organism or something. And he was so much, so absolutely embedded and immersed in the instrumentality of theater, but the conventional notions of the materiality of theater were hopelessly inadequate because they can't get at the expressive nature of materiality in Shakespeare. That's why I went

back to people like Herder. So I think all of that is utterly unique to Shakespeare. I don't think any other playwright does that at all.

I think this is why Shakespeare is writing for the future, always writing for futures, because it requires… I think that something of the same kinds of possibilities, to use that word I was using, is there in other writers in other art forms, so I think for example… I shouldn't talk about other art forms, though I do think… I'm not an expert at all in music, but it is interesting to see it in someone like Beethoven. You listen to that and you just think, "This guy never stops." I listen to his stuff and I just think, "He just keeps going," and that reminds me of Shakespeare. The way in which you think it's going to resolve and there it goes again, and it goes again. There's that sort of thing, and the idea that any kind of moment of appeasement is a temporary thing. Rest is… I love Leibniz's stuff about "There is no such thing as stillness, there's no such thing as silence, there's no such thing as rest. These are just temporary abatements and the moment actually can't end."

In literature, the ones that occur to me that have some sort of similarity to Shakespeare are people like Faulkner, I think. He comes to mind very powerfully. I've been reading him quite a lot lately, and I think he, in different ways… In *Absalom, Absalom!* or *Light in August*, they're unbelievably Shakespearean, not just in being influenced by Shakespeare all over the place, which clearly they are, but in the sleeplessness of Faulkner's prose, the recapitulative energy. But also the other thing which Shakespeare has much more than any other playwright – and it's something that, say, is in there in *The Faerie Queene* – is the permeable boundaries between different characters. That mix of allegorical and naturalistic characterization. Shakespeare's not the only one who does that. That element is there in Middleton to a lesser, to a different degree, but that's there in Faulkner as well. And the other thing which is really interesting is – one of the things I love about Shakespeare is – how you get, how say, a single character… Characters don't simply arrive in Shakespeare. You have these graduated arrivals and graduated disappearances and so they can be differently present at different moments. Present to themselves, present to others, present to the story, and they can come in and out of focus, whatever, they move at different speeds. It's a quantumized kind of world, I think, Shakespeare's. I don't think anyone else does that. So in Marlowe, they just self-announce: "Here we are!" In Jonson, the same thing, they're like little fragments of characters, but that fragment is absolutely present and never gets any bigger or any smaller. It's just what it is. I think that Faulkner does that as well. I think he has characters… Some characters are always in

the shade, like Joe Christmas in *Light in August*, who's like this kind of weird silhouette who then suddenly emerges into light in this lurid, horrifying immediacy and then disappears again. He's there in the kitchen in that terrifying relationship with that woman, that sort of spinster… He goes up to her room and has sex with her and he goes into her kitchen like a cat and he gets milk from a bowl and he licks it. He's there and there's this incommensurable relationship between his body and the kitchen; he's like an ontological invader or something. I think that element, that sense in Faulkner that you've got to be absolutely alert to the possibility that different creatures are made differently, that not everyone's made of the same substance, that people can be differently present. I'd love to write about Faulkner. I haven't written a word about Faulkner. But I think that is something which is like Shakespeare.

Spiro: *As I Lay Dying* is like that as well. When Addie finally speaks from beyond death. That clarified the Ghost in *Hamlet* for me.

Palfrey: Oh, right. I have to confess that I haven't ever finished *As I Lay Dying*, even though it's so much shorter and easier! I'm going to read it but that's just purely accidental. It has to do with having children, you know what I mean? I've read the other ones a few times.

Spiro: That's also funny because that's the most narrative-driven of Faulkner's novels. It has a straightforward story.

Palfrey: Yeah, I know, it is. I can see it, really. I'll read it tonight.

I think in English literature, it's interesting to compare. I've been reading the Romantics a lot lately, and looking at things like… not just Romantic poetry, but their dramas, whether for the stage or not for the stage. And they're quite interesting to work out why they fail, or whether they fail… like Wordsworth's *Borderers*, which has got a Shakespeare quote every second line. It's very strange. It doesn't really work as a play, but it's clearly trying to… It doesn't work as a play mainly I think because Wordsworth has no clue about the instrumental nature of theater. He's got no understanding of or knowledge of or feeling for the cogs and springs that make a performance. And so everything's a simulacrum in that play, in that poem. But as a thing which is trying to create a compass of characters and working with all these shadows and repetitions, it's really interesting. He uses the model of theater to allow for this layered, modular approach to characterization, which he also gets from Shakespeare, I think.

Spiro: Does that also apply to Shelley's *La Cenci*?

Palfrey: That's more like Webster or something, isn't it? [Shelley's] *Prometheus Unbound* or something is more like [Milton's] *Samson Agonistes*, but it's an amazing piece. It's multi-voiced, it's like a symphony or something, but it's a different kind of polyphony than the Shakespearean polyphony.

I've come to think that Shakespeare's complexity or polyphonic nature is to do with a political or ethical vision of life. It's hard to talk about this without saying… It's not about apprehending different possibilities or just saying, "Shakespeare sees all sides." I think there's something different.

I'm thinking of Shelley, with this very powerful political vision, which is inarguable. You have to recognize that, and then there's a sort of pitilessness in Shelley's vision where he allows for… He has to countenance certain forms of violence as necessary. He has to have these sort of mystifying forms of… He's against corruption so he has to mystify certain things because everything is necessary in the end… Blake, similarly… I think that there's that mixture of very overt political arguments about modern love and freedom and so forth, but then also trying to redeem experiences, redeem experience as it is suffered as somehow already sacred. The idea that, just because you're miserable and powerless and dying or dead doesn't mean that it's nothing. The idea of wanting, "I think it's so great that it [suffering] sometimes leads to these mystical visions."

I don't think Shakespeare does any of that. I think that Shakespeare's fundamental eye is always upon living, the experience of living. And sometimes that living is dying, but dying is form of living, living is a form of dying. I think that he never takes refuge in mystical consolation or metaphysical consolation, ever. There's no metaphysical consolation in Shakespeare, as there is in Shelley. Metaphysical consolation. I think that means that it's really important not to reify Shakespeare's forms or it's important to – it's important to Shakespeare; it's the most unique thing in Shakespeare – it's important to treat everything as if it's for real in Shakespeare. To take everything literally, to allow its reality, allow its facticity, allow its possibility, everything. As a kind of aspirant for or to life.

This is what attracted me to Leibniz, his *Monadology*, which is the idea everything, that all of these things, you have things that are possible, things that are impossible, but they all exist. I think in

Shakespeare, to take this very simple example of Shakespeare's figurative density: What does it mean to write in such a way that you have, say, three or four different possibilities, each of which generates further possibilities in Shakespeare? And what do we do with that? The claims, the demands of performance, theater performance or television performance or whatever, the demands of teaching, the demands of writing critical books, all these things are arguing... and the demands of coherence, plot coherence, all demands you to say, "This is the main meaning, and these are kind of ancillary or subsidiary things," so they become a kind of footnote where the real thing is… They become a footnote if they become anything at all.

But always there's this idea to taxonomize and hierarchicalize Shakespeare's meanings. I don't think he works… Clearly there are certain meanings which generate and which recuperate the plot and work in the plot and all that sort of stuff, and express emotion and all that, but it seems to me that Shakespeare is not going to be surprised by… If you find latent meaning in some speech of Macbeth or something, if you told Shakespeare that, he wouldn't be surprised by that. He's sort of hyper-alert to this, almost insanely alert to the whispers in words and the latency and all this sort of stuff, and he sees it, he sees the possibilities. It just seems to me that this is political and ethical, in the basic sense that these are… *lives*. I see these as lives, really. I don't mean just individual, I don't mean lives as in "Joe Blond's here." I mean "life-energies" or something.

It's interesting to think about in Shakespeare that question about whether… What grants something existence in a playworld? How do we know something "is" in a world? And does that depend upon its recognition? Does that mean that if you don't recognize something, it doesn't exist? Or is it possible that acts of recognition, that the idea that recognition confers not just identity but recognition confers existence is itself an unethical proposition. And I believe the latter.

I think the basic contract Shakespeare makes with his auditors is, "I will give you a pleasurable, interesting, moving story with all of these figures and so forth, but at every moment you're going to realize you're missing things. At every moment there will be implications that you cannot address in that moment." Nobody else writes like that. Nobody else writes in such a way that moment by moment you realize that things are being spoken that you can't understand. At the same time, at that moment, it's absolutely clear emotionally. You know exactly… But every moment in Shakespeare when that's happening is very strange. You think about, "Why would a popular playwright write in such a way? Why can't he just thin it out a bit? Why can't he write…

Why does he have to write so figuratively all the time? Why does every figure of speech, why does every metaphor, have to invoke types of wordplay which then go off in different directions?"

So the basic contract is one of generosity and withholding. The basic contract is one where you're in the moment, sharing the moment, sharing this world and creating it together with whoever else, with words, with actors, whatever. But at the same time, there's this other stuff which you're not sharing, or that if you do start to share, other stuff has to go on without you. So you can sit there pondering, and if you temporalize a play, and think of it in those terms, as soon as you want to rest a bit in this particular line, think about this line, then the rest of the play is gone, it's moved ahead. And you're there. "Hang on, wait!" It won't wait.

So why would someone with Shakespeare's, as it were, *intelligence* write like that? He doesn't write like that not knowing what he's doing. So he takes that seriously that he can write whatever he wants and what does it mean? It's not simple logistical things. So he's writing this way. Why? Because he wants more performances? Because he wants to create an industry of Shakespeare scholars? I don't necessarily disagree with either of those. But he's certainly writing worlds in which there is more life than can be ever recognized. And so the identification of meaning is not the creator or manipulator or the imprimatur of existing. So I think that becomes a really fundamental… The ontology of life in Shakespeare… Being is not the same as knowing in Shakespeare. There's being without knowing. Again this is another way of saying that there is more to be discovered. But it's *there*. I want to argue that it's *there*. In that sense it might be something like a Leibnizian "plenum," a world that's *full*. But we cannot even begin… Scientists know this, that we don't know enough, we don't know all that we will know in the future. It's the same in Shakespeare.

But I think it's there. I think it's an ethical-political point about recognition. That you begin to… The more you listen, the more you realize that there's suffering, that there's unacknowledged suffering. There are feelings, there are centers of feeling everywhere. That's what I think when I listen to Shakespeare. It's just amazing to do… Like, just the other day, you get these students, you look at a bit of *Macbeth*, or it could be anything, just the discoveries are just amazing all the time. The students discover stuff or notice things. Sometimes they're not quite keyed in, but very often they are.

So I think it's to do with the real distinctiveness, the real uniqueness of Shakespeare, or one of the unique things about Shakespeare, is this dispensation in which you get the delivery of life which may be latent or obscured or occluded, turning in these tiny little circles, vibrating in strange, unacknowledged elasticity or something. That's happening, that's there. You get the supernova of plot or story riding roughshod over, but within that there's this little bit of unacknowledged life. Shakespeare thematizes this, like in *Henry V* or something where you get this huge story and then it zooms in on single moments where people are trembling before the battle. It's really important. Or Poor Tom, that's what Poor Tom *is*. Poor Tom is that tremble. Poor Tom is that unacknowledged, individuated, particular life. I think this is something that you can biographize. You can turn it into a living, life-size character, or you can see it happening in a cue-space. And a cue-space is alive with the same kind of energy and the same kind of located sense of dyadic possibilities. And I think there's that feeling for life in all things human and non-human, formal and material, and so forth.

I think Shakespeare's kind of a weird… I see Shakespeare increasingly as having this very strange kind of tactility, where he just feels the life in everything, like a sensorium or something. I don't mean in a sentimental way. But I mean that… I remember years ago Antony Sher said about Macbeth… He said he played Macbeth as a raw man, as a man without any skin, stripped.[3] And that's fantastic. That's exactly it. I see Shakespeare as a raw man. He *feels* everything. And he feels the pathos in his own forms as well. I think that's the message… What I try to get at in the *Possible Worlds* book is that. It's the pathos of form, really, and to try to imagine what it would be like to be a cue, or to be a metaphor, or to be an implication of a polysemic expression which no one gets. And just, "That's what you are." And just, listen. You're sort of *there*. And what if somebody gets it? There's a recognition. It's a very strange thing.

That's why Milton is amazing with his… He has incredible control, but there's always a sense that there's a correct meaning in Milton. It's sort of self-disciplining. You get one meaning at the end of one line, and then the next line, and then the sentence resolves it into what it should be. I don't mean this as a Stanley Fish thing, but there is this sense in which you're experiencing forms of errancy and then you come upon correctness. He learns a lot from Shakespeare but I think he wants to discipline him. He wants to discipline Shakespeare.

So, yeah, I see it as a form of hyper-realism or something. I don't know if anyone else writes quite like that. I don't know. What do you think?

Spiro: The only poet I've read with that level of what you're describing, that attentiveness to the polysemic, where you know you're missing things and you have to keep going back, is Emily Dickinson. She does it in these tiny little units. But you can keep going back and it's a different poem.

Palfrey: Yeah. I was looking at her yesterday actually, and I think that's right. But it's a very different thing in a play, though, isn't it? You can see it in Wallace Stevens or somebody, or Geoffrey Hill who died yesterday. There's a very different sort of thing. That's more to do with deciphering and working out. But there's something very odd and unique about writing something which is designed to be popular, appealing to a popular audience, which is happening in the moment and yet having all of this latency. And then asking about… And then trying to think about that in a way that's not… It doesn't seem enough to say, "Ah, he's writing for readers." That's not enough. Or, "He's writing for super-clever auditors." I absolutely think that when he's writing, he's anticipating lots of different types of listeners or witnesses. I think that's the case but, again, that's not enough. I think that the argument on the basis of the phenomenology of attendance is important, and I think the argument in terms of the anticipated forms of publication or readership is relevant, but it's not enough. I think there's a sort of active politics, an active metaphysics in the act of writing like this.

Spiro: Can we go back to your point about Shakespeare writing for the future? In *Doing Shakespeare* and some of your other works, you – like a lot of other people here at Oxford – you think about the first time these words were said. You think about the original performance and production, the actors, the playhouse, the audience, all the original conditions. You get back into the original context. A lot of people are doing this really good work on the intellectual currents of the time, what the audience expected, what was Shakespeare's education, what were the familiar rhetorical forms, so as to get into the minds of the original auditors and actors. You do this, but then you show that Shakespeare is for the future. You refer to Leibniz and Kierkegaard and yourself in your own particular moment. I'm curious about the dialectic of getting back into the original audience's heads, while also projecting forward to only what we get that they couldn't get, and then into the future.

Palfrey: I haven't tried to think about Shakespeare's audiences. I'm less interested in a way about thinking about the particular or the likely or the probable assumptions or tastes or whatever of Shakespeare's audiences. I don't really think about that. What I think about are limit-conditions or the basic permissions of the context, of the circumstance or the situation. I think about that. So, for example, I think about the fact of… I think questions of literacy or otherwise are pertinent because I think it's useful to remind ourselves that drama is a fundamentally oral medium. So that's interesting in terms of the importance of listening to Shakespeare. And that Shakespeare's expectation is the words will be attended to, that you might close your eyes, that you might not be able to see, that you might be five foot tall and you can't see a bloody thing.

And then there's the forms of word pictures or the distributive *ekphrasis* of Shakespeare's creation or whatever. So using the basic limit condition as it were, or the basic sociological demographic fact, and then thinking about the kind of writing, the kind of art form that might be answerable to that and generated out of that. Or thinking about the whole stuff about original performance and so forth with the parts… It is interesting to think about – using that information technology, as it were – thinking hard about what that might have done, but not so much so as to try to say "This is what Burbage or whoever would have thought," but rather to try to identify the kinds of relation that the actor might have with the words given, or with other actors, the kind of field of possibilities that are being opened up by this basic technology as we can reconstruct it.

Which goes to say that, and recognizing that, one thing I've come to more and more realize is that Shakespeare wrote in such a way… I think Shakespeare always exceeds any recoverable context we can get. So a couple of examples of that. I spent a lot of time in the past really thinking about the ways in which Shakespeare writes for particular actors, but then again and again recognizing that he's always got the actors in mind but only in such a way that he may be writing beyond the actors. He writes words that the actors can do nothing with other than speak the words. They can't possibly disentangle the words. They can't express the words physically. They just have to speak them. He gives actors words that they are unlikely to understand. He gives actors words which have got nothing to do with their character. Things like that, that's one example.

And he writes in such a way that when I say he's writing for the future, one thing that Shakespeare is clearly writing is… I gave a bunch of lectures a few weeks ago, public lectures in Oxford, about death – relating to the Bodleian exhibition, "Moments of Dying" – and I had a couple, like, two or

three actors with me, and we just went through various scenes of dying. Mercutio's dying or Desdemona's dying or whoever's, and we just talked about it. And with tiny little snapshots like that, we were showing the multiple ways in which this moment might be acted. The multiple ways in which the act of dying or the act of killing might be modulated or orchestrated in relation to the words given, the pauses, and those things. So Shakespeare's always writing in such a way that it *demands* more than one performance. He's writing in such a way that no single act-ing, no single performance, can ever be the thing. It's never… There's never a secure or completed identity between any act and any action, as it were. There's always a really interesting sense in which you're a ghost: you haunt the moment, rather than you're identical to the moment. I think the more you historicize or try to recover the original context of these plays, the more you realize that they exceed them. They're written for futures.

This equally applies to any available… Whether we're talking about political institutions or political theory, for example, or literary institutions or literary theory, or whatever, there's no literary theory of the late sixteenth century that can speak to what Shakespeare does. The closest I can think of is actually *The Winter's Tale*, which I think theorizes drama with more sophistication than anything else. But it's hopeless. The same with political theory. There's no… Plays like *Richard II* or something are so sophisticated in the way they dramatize institutions.

So, in other words, my interest in trying to recover the conditions of possibility for Shakespeare's writing leads me into a sense of the absolute necessity of anachronism as a critical tool, as a methodological tool, because the writing itself is always anachronic. I mean by that, not simply "anachronistic," in the sense that Shakespeare gives a clock in *Cymbeline*, that's interesting enough but that's not the main thing. But anachronic in the sense that it's always overlaying multiple times, both in the larger historical sense but also in a single moment of speaking. In the sense that, whatever the idea, it's so alert to the genealogy of that idea or action, the genealogy in the sense of its past, its present, and its future, that the possible futures of say, something like kingship, or the possible futures of friendship, or whatever, these are all kind of apprehended in the moment. So I think there's a sort of pure logic in reaching for subsequent theorists or philosophers or whatever in trying to come to terms or trying to find a language for what Shakespeare does because the work is always anachronic. The work is never settled in its own historical moment.

There are multiple ways you could see this. You could see this in a really basic, almost positivistic way. If Shakespeare looks at a thing, and that thing might be an institution like monarchy or family or marriage or justice… He looks at a thing and it kind of turns, and the whole thing, all its facets get revealed. Which means that every imaginable lifeline of that thing is… In plays like *Measure for Measure* or *Merchant of Venice* or something, the plays already anticipate all of the future possibilities for justice or tyranny or anti-Semitism or democracy or whatever. If you want to think in those terms, you'll discover it, because he thinks to the end of the idea.

What I'm really saying is that, for me, Historicism – trying to pay attention to the conditions of production, put it that way – leads necessarily into the future. I'm not sure I can quite say that only we can get it, as it were. That's not quite what I mean. I don't quite mean that Shakespeare is writing in such a way that only twenty-first-century audiences can understand what he said. I don't quite think that because I've got no doubt that there are all sorts of things that Shakespeare said that we no longer get. That we miss things. It's more like that Walter Benjamin thing where he talks in "The Origin of German Tragic Drama," his version of the origin, his version of the *Ursprung* ["origin"] or whatever it is, is that the origin of something isn't simply its moment of springing-up, but something which is this… It's a spring that might be intermittently springing over centuries and not have a power of recognition at different moments. The idea of a spring that keeps springing, and to do with things coming-true irregularly and intermittently. I think part of that might be that the particular insurgency, I'll say, or the eruptive possibilities of a moment, might disappear. It's not that all of them will be always co-present, and so right now we get this amazing, orgasmic recognition of all of Shakespeare or whoever. I imagine if you… It's interesting reading about Oliver Cromwell, the ways in which he was talked about in 1660s – I was just reading about this [*laughs*] – there's an incredible feeling for the Restoration, the people who applauded the king's return, they're painting him as an absolute diabolical, a figure of evil, of satanic majesty, as though there's been a kind of era-monster that's gone mad and taken the form of… You can have a feeling, the energy of things, it's very hard to recover the sense of Cromwell as a monster.

There's an interest in subsequent writers to do with... It's partly just trying to find a language. I was thinking for a while of playing with the idea of a second nature. Everyone goes on about Shakespeare being the "poet of nature" and so forth and I think about taking that on for real. I

don't know enough science to do this, but there's the idea that the coordinates in Shakespeare, the physics of Shakespeare or something, trying to think in those terms, that maybe this idea of Shakespeare as the poet of nature is true because his works, however they do it, kind of apprehend the way things actually were in the world, the natural, actually were in nature.

Spiro: Is it that Shakespeare does these amazing things with words, or is he showing us the way that words actually work? Not that he saw things that we can't see, but that with his help we can see them. I'm trying to avoid the deifying of him. He seemed to understand things about physics that had yet to be codified, but he was aware of Copernican theory. He knew the people who brought it to England, even though he didn't write about it. I thought about this a lot while reading *Macbeth, Macbeth*: Is there a qualitative and quantitative difference about Shakespeare's words? Or is he just making us more attentive, in an almost childish way, to the all the ways that our words mean things that we don't think we mean? Like when you make an accidental dirty pun.

Palfrey: It's such an interesting question because it's tempting to say that they're the same thing, but I think that they're also not. I always think that with Shakespeare, more than any other writer, he has this super self-reflexive quality, where the words are commenting upon their own employment all the time. In *Richard II*, that remarkable scene where Richard's wife is there and there's all that stuff about pregnancy and so forth and giving birth, and the whole thing seems to be apostrophizing what's about to happen, as though it has already happened. That's a model of how Shakespeare often works. He incorporates hermeneutic guides to his own work all the time.

It's also to do with the vision, the apprehension that Shakespeare always seems to have of the history of words, where they come from. I don't think Shakespeare's particularly interested in Latinate or Hebrew or Greek – we all know he didn't know this – etymology in that sense that George Herbert often plays with, or Milton. But I do think that Shakespeare is always attuned to the physical folk-activity which is activated or latent in words. So when Othello talks about "There where I have garnered up my heart," what does he mean by "garnered"? You just have to think… As soon as you begin to think of a granary, the whole thing comes to be true... the idea of seeds in a granary and so on. I think there's a sense in which Shakespeare is constantly mobilizing an available democratized history in his words. When I talk about the best way to read Shakespeare is to read him literally, I mean that. You've got to read his metaphors literally, and I simply mean

you just have to realize them. What is the physical activity? He's always got that in his mind's eye, I think.

So that gets back to your question about what words are. I think words are *active* in Shakespeare in multiple ways. I don't think they illustrate or represent an interior reality, but I think they absolutely generate and procreate, this sort of thing. They're generative also in a recovering way, where they generate action which derives from the past so as to move into the future. What I mean by that is that I don't think he writes in an abstract way. I don't think he writes in an approximate way. I think abstraction and approximation are kind of the enemies of Shakespeare. So I think that what he does is… He uses language: metaphor, metalepsis, metonym, whatever, the basic categories, the basic Shakespearean personifications and so forth, he uses these ways… He wants us to realize the meanings in those words. Now that means that he writes in such a way as to be working against the simple approximations of everyday expression. He works against the forms of dead metaphor that Shelley goes on about in *Defense of Poetry*. What Shakespeare is always trying to do is revitalize metaphor so that it's not so much the commonsensical meaning but the daily, vernacular, emptied-out meaning of words is partly… It's always going to be active, but it's never the main purpose, it's never the main meaning. His attention to, as it were, the physical folk-etymology of words, that's the thing you've got to attend to, and you recover that, and you dynamize that, and that's where you get the active. It's that imagined activity which has future-energy, and that's the thing where you get these spools of possibility. I think that's where it comes from.

And that also characterizes… That's where you get the emotional, expressive, individualizing implications of the language. It comes from that, from the particular speaker, and of course there can be meanings which go above and beyond or beneath the speaker's own intentions or knowledge. So all the time there's… Getting back to your distinction between doing something strange with words or showing how words actually work, I think it's both. I think it's like a holographic thing or something, where you see a word or a phrase... Not just individual words: it's phrases or lines or ends of lines. I have done quite a lot of thinking about the end of a line in Shakespeare, and the idea that the end of a line, the space between the end of a line and the beginning of the next line, is always alive in Shakespeare. It's full of these adumbrated possibilities because the phrase pushes out. There might be disappointed possibilities, or there might be

consummated possibilities, but you won't know, quite. They're always there. So it's doing something strange with words by a form of realism, "realism" in the sort of medieval sense of the word, the scholastic. There's a form of realism in Shakespeare which insists upon the reality of the word with its own history. Not just the word, but its own tendrils, a kind of rhizomatic… Each word has these rhizomatic relationships to possibility or to history. And history, of course, is the recoverable thing.

I think this is also why conventional models of history are inadequate for Shakespeare. Conventional historicism is too static, it's too positivistic. It's not mercurial enough. It doesn't move quickly enough. It doesn't allow for simultaneity. Things like one of my favorite bits in the *Possible Worlds* book is looking at the opening speech of *Henry IV Part One*, looking at the unbelievable traversing of time and space. It has all these false starts, and he's mucking around so much with cause and effect. There's all kinds of things going on there. You need to have a sense of recognizing that Shakespeare's apprehension of history is as labile and as portable and as super-imposing and so forth as his own forms are. History isn't a long-distance continuum, or it's not *just* a long-distance continuum, and it's not just a present state of affairs. It involves many different agents and apprehensions and often competing, coterminous in a single mind. And then you've got the complexity of a single mind, and then room for other people, for each of them.

Spiro: You have collaborated with Tiffany Stern, with Emma Smith, and with Ewan Fernie. There are a lot of people at Oxford doing good work on Shakespeare right now. And I think I can say that that wasn't always the case. For a time, the major places were Berkeley and Harvard in the United States, and at times Liverpool or Sussex or other places in the UK, but there are a lot of people here now. Tiffany Stern, Emma Smith, Bart van Es, Colin Burrow, Jonathan Bate, Laurie Maguire, Lorna Hutson, and so on. Oxford is a good place in which to study Shakespeare. I'm curious if you're self-aware about that, and if there is a current "Oxford School" of Shakespeare that approaches things a particular way? In the same way that Berkeley and other places have had their own specific schools of thought?

Palfrey: There are clearly overlaps, mini-overlaps. Clearly there's been a big influence… Tiffany and I came to Oxford before *Shakespeare in Parts* was published, but it was on the way, and they knew it was on the way. We got our jobs partly because of that book. There was also this interesting little thing where we got – at the time, back in 2005 it was – where Yale invited us. They had one

of their searches; they wanted to find the up-and-coming Shakespeareans. They invited Tiffany and I and Lukas Erne out there, supposedly to give a lecture that turned out to be a job interview. And I went out there on the weekend after Tiffany had been there and I already knew it was a job interview, and on the Monday I was going to start my job here, and I said, "Look, I'm just not going to come. I can't… My kids are one and three." So there was some sense in which this book was interesting.

Shakespeare in Parts had a big influence on Bart [van Es], not just *Shakespeare in Parts* but Tiffany's work, *Documents of Performance [in Early Modern England]*. Those influenced Bart's book *Shakespeare in Company*. So in that sense… Tiffany and Bart have been doing an M.St. course together, and Tiffany and I did one a few years ago on scenes and plots and stuff. And certainly there's a way in which even the work that I've gone on to do, like say, *Shakespeare's Possible Worlds*, one way of seeing that book is it takes all the multiple, all the fragments, seeing each and all of the constituent particulars of Shakespeare as having their own expressive life, expressive purpose, and so forth: that's an extension of the basic *Shakespeare in Parts* model. It's an extension of Tiffany's work on the fragmented play-text. It does it in a very different idiom, and its philosophical and political interests are nothing particularly – Tiffany's not interested in that sort of stuff – but it pays on the promise of some of that, or it takes some of these premises and just explodes them. And also it takes some of the stuff about writing to the plot or writing for the part and thinking about the implications of that.

So stuff that Tiffany and I… We thought briefly about doing another collaborative book but we just couldn't bear the thought. It would have been based around this M.St. course we did. So our work remains partly coordinate. I think the critical work remains partly coordinate, although it's more like a premise that there's more to be done. The models of thinking had been a bit moribund and we can explode them a bit.

I don't think… With the others [here at Oxford], with Emma and so forth, we did the exhibition together ["Shakespeare's Dead" at the Bodleian Library, in celebration of the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's death], because we were good citizens, really. Nobody particularly wanted to… It was just "Here's another thing we have to do," but then it turned out to be good fun. It was good fun and we worked well together, but it was more "Let's get the job done." The book

[*Shakespeare's Dead* (2016)] was written very quickly. And it wasn't… We weren't trying to influence others.

Spiro: The spirit of fun in it wasn't expected, given the subject matter. I got the sense you were both having a really good time.

Palfrey: Yeah, it was good fun, but that was written… I wrote a bit more than Emma. She did a lot of the work on the pictures and stuff. It was written a bit like you're writing for school. Or like *Doing Shakespeare* but slightly less intense. It was like that. So there's not really… There are kind of synergies and friendly helping but it's not really a deep intellectual partnership with Emma or with Laurie [Maguire], though we've begun to talk about doing some stuff. And I don't think there's any… For me, anyway, there's nobody in Oxford that I'm working with on the kind of *Macbeth, Macbeth* stuff, on the creative stuff. Although it's interesting because I'm doing another project at the moment, the *Faerie Queene* project called *Demons Land*, which is getting a lot of support within Oxford. And that's been interesting.

So Tiff's moving, she's going to Royal Holloway [of the University of London]. It's interesting that we still, in ten years, we keep on finding ourselves in the same… We're the one who have been hauled up to give reports about… We've both got these TORCH Fellowships: she's doing *King Lear*, on Nahum Tate's *King Lear*, and I'm doing this thing on *The Faerie Queene*. We both have these fellowships which are about interdisciplinary work and working with other practitioners and so forth. It's interesting, our work is divergent but coordinate in curious ways. I think it's more, not direct collaboration with Tiff, but there's a way in which there's this instinct for doing something a little bit different, and trying to push it a bit. That's been there. But specifically on the creative, fictional stuff, that's been very much my own thing within Oxford. No one else has been… I think if I have to generalize about Oxford, I'd say that the dominant… Well, it's impossible within Oxford to get any perspective upon it. One of the things I like about Oxford, is that you're *nobody*. Right, you know what I mean? Within Oxford, you're nobody. It's brilliant.

Spiro: No. What do you mean?

Palfrey: What I mean is that it really is a sort of democracy. You've got all these different colleges, and everyone's got their students, and everyone's got their responsibilities. You don't have star professors who get out and don't have to do examining and don't have to sit on committees. You

get no such thing. We could be at other places and be that person, but here, it's not like that. So I quite like it, but you don't have any perspective that you don't feel particularly important or you don't feel particularly known or anything like that. But I know, I sometimes can get a little bit of perspective upon my colleagues, like the ones you have mentioned, that elsewhere they're seen as big people, important people within the field, but within Oxford it doesn't really work that way.

Spiro: Tiffany joked that you all just run into each other at the Shakespeare Association of America conference.

Palfrey: Yeah. "We must get together." Because you're so busy, and everybody's got their own responsibilities within their own little world and so on. To the extent that there's a recognizable Oxford thing, I think it would be things like, you've got Emma's book on the First Folio [*The Making of Shakespeare's First Folio*], you've got Bart's *Shakespeare in Company*, you've got *Shakespeare in Parts* and Tiffany's *Documents of Performance*. That stuff is… Where it's, I suppose, some attempt to move… If there's a distinctive thing it might be to do with trying to link… I don't really know, actually! I'm just making it up.

There was an interesting way in which I think the *Shakespeare in Parts* book was unusual because it connected theater history with original interpretation, and usually it's one or the other. Bart tried to do something similar with *Shakespeare in Company* where he tries to bring theater history and interpretation together. But I don't think anyone else within Oxford is doing the kind of work that I've been doing with *Poor Tom* and *Possible Worlds* or *Macbeth, Macbeth*. I think it probably has more affinities with work… I don't know who it's got affinities with, to be honest. Maybe there's certain people, there's the odd person in the States or Cambridge, in different areas. But not really, it's more singular than that.

Ewan Fernie is more, for me, the most present collaborator in the sense that his own work is very different. It's his own thing. There's the Shakespeare Now! stuff we've done for ten years. And that's been just an idea to try and shake things up a bit.

Spiro: And his *Shame in Shakespeare* book and your work have an overlap in the interest in the ethical. You both reclaim the practice of taking Shakespeare's characters as real people, that real things happen to them. And think about them in a more humane way as opposed to they're just within discourses of power or a collection of language.

Palfrey: Yes, the *Shame* book predates my friendship with him. I didn't even know him then. But yeah, I think so. So it's interesting. It's a sort of thing that you'd have to ask… People on the outside might know. Because it's probably not like Berkeley. It's probably not like that. It's more that there's that kernel of stuff, but certainly with me, you ask about this idea of singularity or personal stuff, and I think that I don't want to do the same thing over and over again. You kind of know that some people wish you would. Some people would like you to do, "Can't you just do *Doing Shakespeare* kind of stuff?" "*Doing More Shakespeare*." Or *Doing* others: write a book about non-Shakespearean playwrights in the same vein. And that's attractive, it would be good fun. I've half-written a book on the Romantics in the same vein, the Romantic poets, because it's good fun. But I think there's a restlessness where you want to push at stuff, and Shakespeare is a good writer to do that with because you know that Shakespeare can take it. Shakespeare's always better than anything you can do. Although I might do, it would be good to do a non-Shakespeareans book.

Spiro: I'd love to see someone devote more attention to Thomas Dekker or James Shirley. I don't think anybody has taken them as seriously as they should.

Palfrey: No. Well, you could do it!

Spiro: My favorite thing about *Doing Shakespeare* is the absence of footnotes. You just read closely as if no one has ever done it before.

Palfrey: [*laughs*] Yeah. That annoyed some people. I remember there was a review of it by somebody, Michael Taylor wrote something, I can't remember it exactly, "Palfrey disdains the priesthood."[4] That sort of thing. "He only wants elbow room for his own flights of fancy," or whatever.

Spiro: That could be a blurb.

Palfrey: [*laughs*] Yeah. That was good in that book, just writing off the cuff, really. And *genuinely* off the cuff. And that was also good with *Shakespeare in Parts*; we had an absolute permission not to read anything, not to read critics, because we were pretending we were at the origin. So that's quite nice.

Spiro: Where do you see Early Modern Studies going? What might be promising? You were saying before that there's still work to be done. Do you have a sense of the trajectory of things? What would you like to see more people doing?

Palfrey: It's hard to answer that question because there's different ways of thinking about it. I think there's a tendency to think that it's been done and that we all somehow understand Shakespeare and Milton and all the rest of them. Or that the things to be written about have been written and therefore people go into this collateral context and they write about whatever. So Milton or Shakespeare or whoever else becomes a symptom of some prior or some contemporary discourse, this sort of thing.

A lot of the cleverer stuff in Shakespeare in the last few years has been written not about the plays themselves but about the history of their publication. The subsequent textual history, really clever stuff by Zach Lesser and Jeremy Lopez, these sort of people, who write with this forensic and slightly imaginative way, and theoretically informed, but they're casting their eyes upon the quirks of editors and readers and so on.

But if you get students who say, "I'd like to read a good piece of criticism," and you mentioned these other dramatists, try and find something decent written about *anyone* apart from Shakespeare. It's really quite hard. Anything that's real, rather than an introductory book about Renaissance dramatists which are often just banal. Nothing's really happening in them. I sort of think the same about Milton, actually. The readers, the writers who want to really take it on, they're few and far between. So I'd like more of that. Think of Ben Jonson, there's an amazing, fantastic new Cambridge edition, but there's a real paucity of work on Jonson. Or any of these. There really is. But taking it on in a way that's not old-fashioned formalism.

So I think that to the extent that I'd like to… You can think in a sort of vainglorious way that, that maybe, in five, ten, fifteen, twenty years that people will… Your own work takes ages to filter out into a way that might be influential. And it's quite interesting that books have a history. It's quite interesting that stuff you wrote ten years ago can still be read. That's not very long, but it is still being read. And books that feel quite current are actually nearly ten years old. People still think that *Shakespeare in Parts* is new. I think the *Possible Worlds* book is the most ambitious book I've written. I think there's a theory there of playworlds and the unique ontology and instrumentality

blah blah blah of playworlds, which absolutely can be taken far beyond Shakespeare. I think there's stuff there which, if people did take a sort of permission from it... "This book takes a few risks and does a few things curious things *on purpose*," and then you think, "One of the things it's trying to do is model a way of approaching play-texts or playworlds that is not theme-driven and that is not prioritizing words as signs above all other things, that is beginning to recognize that a play is… It is taking seriously that a play is collaborative, formally collaborative, and that each individual bit within a play might have expressive potentiality." That sort of stuff.

So as a hermeneutic model I think it is quite interesting, and you can do it. You'd have to adapt it because it's craft-specific and it's author-specific and that sort of stuff. I don't think anyone's quite written something like that. And I think it would be quite good to have that, paying fresh attention, technically-informed and imaginative engagement. I don't think people do that very often. And the thing that struck me in writing that book [*Shakespeare's Possible Worlds*] is just how almost nothing has been done. Almost nothing has been said. I've said nothing. You know what I mean? It's just a tiny, tiny fraction of what you might, just the tiniest fraction.

I always ask students just to take it on. Take on this stuff and try and work out why it *matters*. What's it for? What's it doing? Not just seeing it as symptomatic of something else. But if literature matters, then *why*? Because it does seem to matter.

But the creative stuff is interesting as well, I think, because I think you can ask questions about history and the future and about politics and about the basic existential questions. I think it's sometimes difficult to explore those questions in, as I've already said before, in conventional propositional criticism, because you can end up sounding hectoring or too certain or didactic in unhelpful ways. Not that I've got anything against polemical writing, but I'm interested in ways of writing – not just writing, but also productions – which seek to recover, discover, re-energize the works of the past in ways that the work you do can, as it were, be animate with those same energies. So the critical work is a kind of imminent criticism, in which the critical points, the engagement with the thing, is discovered in the experience of the reading rather than in anything else.

And that's an example of the kind of thing I'm doing with *The Fairie Queene*, actually. The premise of that work, the question is, "What would it mean for a poem to come true?" And the

critical, imaginative conceit is that *The Faerie Queene* is a seminal text, has been a seminal text in subsequent western history, which has been repeating differentially in all these different places. Imperfectly, differentially coming true again and again and again. It's interesting to think of what would it actually *mean* for a world or a society or an individual life to be, as it were, true to *The Faerie Queene*. What would it actually mean? And that might be utterly terrifying. And to actually try to realize the experiential, existential, political, et cetera implications of writing poetry at all. What would it mean if a society or a world or a life was organized like a poem? In stanzas or rhymes or whatever. To think in those terms, you can begin to get really inside the strangeness of poetry, rather than taking it for granted that we all know what it is or what its implications are. It's not just about chastity or something. I think there's some really wonderful criticism of Spenser but it can sometimes be trapped in allegory. But then actually to think about what it means to be an allegory, for example. What might that mean?

Spiro: To think of your own life as being part of an allegory. To know that it is. Like when you read Dante and you realize, "This is not just an allegory. These people know they're in an allegory. They understand the universe that way." The people in Dostoevsky may be the same way, and that's why they seem insane.

Palfrey: I'm very interested in the idea that the allegory is true. That the deception is "the naturalized idea." That's the deception. You've got to translate what you're seeing into the truth. Everything here is "fallen," not in the Christian way, but "fallen" in a kind of Neoplatonic way or something, where everything in the world is a simulacrum waiting for a translation into its truth. It's very strange.

I've been thinking about all that sort of stuff, just imagining Spenser in Ireland. What did he *see*? What did he see when he saw the Irish Catholics? Did he just see these reprobates who were *lost*? They're so reprobated they don't even exist. They didn't even have reality. Something like that.

One of the things that's nice to teach, that's good fun, is to try to… I think the only way to bring literature to life is to try and recover experience, express its particularity, it's specific it-ness in the world, and I think that requires you to estrange it. You've got to estrange. I think it's partly allowing students to become familiar with it, and feeling confident, entering it, taking it on, but it seems to me you mustn't euphemize and familiarize and say, "Let's make this relevant" or

something. Not "relevance" in a way where you're presupposing what "relevance" might mean. "Relevance" is a dead word, it seems to me, rather than some sort of "coming home," "coming through" strangeness. You read something like *Clarissa*. It's just an unbelievable novel, just amazing. I can't make the students read it, you know. You have to take on this strange, almost repellent virtue of Clarissa, and not just judge it, but just kind of enter it.

I think the path to understanding is through making strange, allowing strange. I want to say about Shakespeare, you've got to understand it *is* difficult, that's not the point. If you don't think it is, you're missing something! At the same time, it's available, and it's accessible, but it's also difficult. But yeah, strangeness. So I think critical work which can somehow admit that, enter it, perhaps replicate it, with the idea of wanting to come home experientially or sensuously or something, I think that's nice.

I think that is an answer to… Because I think the question of the future, as it were, of early modern studies is also the future of education. I think those are inextricable, those questions, partly. I think the question of what we might do, how do you justify being in a university, working in one, how do you justify writing books? There's got to be some kind of… It's just the old justifications for reading and thinking.

Spiro: Those questions don't go away. It may be more urgent now than it was before.

Palfrey: No, they don't. I think it gets more pertinent all the time when you… just the shambles of public life. The last few weeks [i.e., the Brexit vote] in Britain, it's just utter shambles. Based upon mendacity, gullibility, this blunt and puerile rhetoric holding sway, and just the fear of thinking, the debasement of language. And actually the ones who won the argument, the European argument, were Boris Johnson and Michael Gove, who are the two most rhetorically adept people. They're the ones who can use language. They used it in a deeply dishonest way, but they were effective.

But then, more really it's just an ignorance. It's just ignorance. And I think that's a battle that's not going to be won. In tiny ways you can try to begin to… This is a very unequal society, Britain, today. It's been a curious thing. The whole referendum, it's the strangest event in my political life, as it were, partly because of things like… I don't think most of the leaders of the Leave campaign… nobody believed they'd win. They all thought somehow, in the end would prevail. I don't think

they [the Remain campaign] actually wanted to win, most of them. Most of the people who voted for it didn't believe it would win, and so they felt free to do this sort of protest vote. Now the main aim of the negotiations is to try to recover as much as possible of what's been lost. So there's this very curious way in which… It was like imagining that it was a signifier without a signified. They're just saying things. It was a kind of illocution without any possible perlocutionary force. It's like that. "We can say things which have no consequence." Like a vote has no consequence.

Spiro: Like being a Fool.

Palfrey: Right, or just like doing that [makes obscene gesture] to a passing police car. As long as they don't see you, it makes no difference. But it's come home, and it's just terrible, it's awful! [*laughs*] And then the only people who have benefited are these disgusting people who now feel they're licensed in racist abuse. And now you've got millions of people who feel unwelcome. It's just shambolic, dreadful. But at the level of discourse and understanding and the power of rhetoric and the imperative that some people can somehow think. *Think*. It's more important than ever. I don't know what to do. It's just terrible.

Spiro: Do you see the implications of the Brexit vote for higher education, here or elsewhere?

Palfrey: Nobody knows. Yes, they can't be good, particularly for the sciences. There's travel, there's loads of cooperative… The European Research Council is huge influence upon grant money. There's loads of collaborative stuff going on. It's a calamity, really. It's just unbelievable. There's nothing good about it. I don't think there's anything good about it. I don't think they can do anything, the immigration thing. Now they're trying to say, "Can we still have free movement?" Well, no, you can't have free movement. It's not going to happen. But in the light of that, what can anything do… I don't know what to do.

So, the press, for example… You weren't here during the campaign so you didn't see it, the papers. The *Daily Mail*, the *Daily Express*, the *Sun*, the *Daily Telegraph*, every single day. They're the four or five biggest-selling papers in the country. Every single day their headline was an anti-immigrant headline. No, that's not quite true. The *Daily Mail*, *Daily Express*, every day. *Daily Telegraph* every day had some kind of thing about, "Rah rah rah Boris Johnson or Michael Gove." So you just had this constant stream of belittling, racist, or not even directly racist… You have one group of people appealing to the home counties, the retired baby boomers and older who just look

after themselves, and then the other one appealing to the non-educated or the poorly educated, who were just, "Yeah, the reason why my life is fucked is because of Remainers, and the remaining fruit-pickers," or whatever. So you have this deeply debased political discourse, really terrible. And then the leaders of the Leave campaign surfing on this wave of bigotry. But then against that, you had the Remain campaign was totally hamstrung by the fact that they were fighting for something they were ambiguous about, because of course there are problems. The Labour Party didn't exist. Corbyn deserves what he's getting now because he was hopeless. The whole thing was shambolic. It was a lesson in what not to do. Obviously this isn't very relevant to what we're supposed to be talking about.

It is interesting though, because a lot of people are saying this is like a bad dream. It's like you've done something… There was this funny thing about Michael Gove: John Crace in the *Guardian* said he looked like someone who had awoken from a bad trip to see that he had murdered his best friend.[5] Something like that. It's got that quality to it. The whole thing, it was like a poem, or it was like a scene from *The Faerie Queene* or from Kafka or something, where you've entered this space, this world of false speaking.

The mitigating thing is what's come home to roost is decades of absolute neglect of the towns, particularly in the North. Complete neglect. Big cities, Manchester and so forth, are okay, but these places like Hartlepool and Bury, Stoke, just kind of nondescript places that no one's got anything… They have been treated with contempt by everybody. So there's a lot that needs to be done. The post-industrial world… Britain has a service economy and it's got fantastic arts and stuff, but in terms of what it gives to the world, you've just got this industries, the wool industry, or the textile industry, or the coal industry, or mining, all those, shipbuilding, it's all gone. And then what replaces it? Nothing. A few spa shops.

Notes

1. "I'll bring thee/ To clustering filberts and sometimes I'll get thee/ Young scamels from the rock." *The Tempest* 2.2.170-172.

2. "Let us imagine that we are entering these plays for the very first time. We have never been here before. We do not know what world we are in, its rules or coordinates, or where we are from moment to moment. We cannot be sure what counts as life. All we can trust is that every last part of this playworld is potentially animate with mind, motion, emotion" (xi). *Doing Shakespeare*. 2nd ed. London: Bloomsbury, 2011.

3. "He was extraordinary […] Like meeting someone who's missing a layer of skin, so that any breeze, any touch, would hurt him. A raw man." John Walsh, "The Best of the Bad Guys." *The Independent* April 30, 2000. http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/profiles/the-best-of-the-bad-guys-277971.html. Accessed September 27, 2016.

4. "Palfrey […] scorns the critical priesthood. He doesn't want anything coming between him and his imagination and the Good Book (Shakespeare's Works)." "Shakespeare and the New." *Shakespeare Survey* 59 (2006): 349.

5. "Over to You, Says Puffy-Eyed Cameron as the Brexit Vultures Circle." *The Guardian* June 24, 2016. https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/jun/24/over-to-you-says-puffy-eyed-cameron-as-brexit-vultures-circle. Accessed September 27, 2016.