[*Expositions* 10.2 (2016) 1–21] *Expositions* (online) ISSN: 1747–5376

Interview: Jonathan Bate, University of Oxford

JOHN-PAUL SPIRO
Villanova University

Sir Jonathan Bate is Professor of English Literature and Provost of Worcester College, Oxford. As the interview below indicates, he has wide-ranging research interests in Shakespeare and Renaissance Literature, Romanticism, biography and life-writing, eco-criticism, contemporary poetry, and theater history. He is a Governor of the Royal Shakespeare Company and engages frequently with literary questions in the public square. I had the chance to sit down with him in early July 2016 – a week after the Brexit vote – at the Provost's Lodgings at Worcester College. We discussed his life and work, Shakespeare studies at Oxford, the place of the humanities in higher education, his struggles with writing a biography of Ted Hughes, and current events. Below is a transcript of that conversation.

Spiro: What brought you to the study of Shakespeare?

Bate: Well, I think, like many literary scholars and, perhaps, humanities academics of all disciplines, great teaching. I was lucky enough in secondary school, high school, to have some brilliant English teachers and a very good drama teacher as well. And so I sort of got hooked on poetry, English literature, at age fifteen, sixteen, seventeen. I was keen on theater as well. I played Macbeth as a sixteen-year-old and there's nothing like acting in a Shakespeare play for internalizing the language. I think I still know the whole of that play by heart. And so it was fairly obvious that an English degree was going to be the thing for me. When it came to a choice of doctorate, I was actually torn between Shakespeare and W. B. Yeats. I had done my undergraduate dissertation on Yeats, but in the end I went for Shakespeare, I think, just because I felt that it led out in so many different directions.

One of the other things that was crucial to my development as a Shakespearean was when I was at Cambridge – I was an undergraduate at Cambridge University – in my final year there was a new option on the history of Shakespeare's influence, Shakespeare's reception, and the chosen topic

for it in its first year was Shakespeare and Romanticism. And I did that, and thought, “This is a really great field.” And that became my Ph.D. topic. What then happened was I got a Harkness Fellowship and went to Harvard for a year, and this was the time where [Harold] Bloom had fairly recently published *The Anxiety of Influence* and there was a very strong sense at Harvard at the time, 1980–81, that Yale was making all the running, so to speak. So I got very interested in Bloom’s work, but actually also interested in the work of my namesake – no relationship – [Walter] Jackson Bate, whose work *The Burden of the Past and the English Poet* actually seemed to me a historically more nuanced account of literary influence than Bloom’s *Anxiety of Influence*.

And then reading the work of Bloom and his protégés, they were all obsessed with this idea that there was an Oedipal struggle between Milton and the Romantics: Blake writing about Milton being “the poet of the devil’s party without knowing it,” Keats saying that he gave up Hyperion because of the power of Milton’s language. This just got me thinking that it was very different from the relationship between Shakespeare and the Romantics, that although Shakespeare was an inhibition in the writing of verse drama, and of course, all the English Romantics, like many of the European Romantics, did write verse dramas in the style of Shakespeare, but those of the English Romantics are notable disasters. I don’t think that’s unfair. I think Byron is the one who actually can write for the theater. But in terms of the way that Shakespeare provided a model for ideas of the imagination, ideas of some world beyond the natural world, the supernatural, the sublime, and above all, the way that Shakespeare’s linguistic inventiveness shaped the lyric poetry of the Romantics. I thought, “What about developing a kind of model of benign influence, as opposed to a Bloomian model of malignant influence?” That became my Ph.D. topic.

I went back to Cambridge to do the doctorate, and wrote about Shakespeare and the Romantics. Well, it seemed to me, in writing that, I sort of fell under the influence of Christopher Ricks, who was one of my teachers in Cambridge, who was particularly interested in poetic allusion. What happens when poets use the words of previous poets? And so a lot of that thesis, which became my first book, *Shakespeare and the English Romantic Imagination*, was about allusion and its effects. But then it seemed to me there was a linked question, which is, “How recognizable allusions are by readers.” There’s no point in making a literary allusion unless your reader is going to pick it up and think about it. And in order to explore that, I started looking more widely at how widely known Shakespeare was and the uses of Shakespearean quotation in the wider culture of

the late eighteenth/early nineteenth century, and got particularly interested in the theater history of the time, but also in Shakespeare and popular culture. I did quite a lot of work on the uses of Shakespearean quotation in political caricature at the time. My second book, which was called *Shakespearean Constitutions*, probably the least well-known, least-read of my books, it explores Shakespeare's wider shaping influence on English culture between 1730 and 1830, which really was the time when Shakespeare rose to his status as National Poet, Universal Genius, and so forth. That book was very much about the political uses of Shakespeare. And I think it sort of played a part in an interesting move towards reception history within Shakespeare studies, and perhaps also was part of a move in Shakespeare studies towards an end of the old war between people interested in theater and those of a more strictly literary-textual sort, because theater history and theater criticism became a big part of that book.

Spiro: A few questions about Shakespeare. I was rereading your *Soul of the Age*, and I watched *Being Shakespeare*, which you wrote for Simon Callow, and I participated in the MOOC that you just did [Shakespeare and His World, with the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust]. There's this wonderful part of *Soul of the Age* where you give short biographies of all of Shakespeare's contemporaries. They are like sad obituaries. So many of them died in debt, were involved with violence, ran afoul of the law, and it's another one of those ways where biographically Shakespeare seems to be exceptional. What are we to make of that? Everybody else looks for trouble or trouble looks for them, but not Shakespeare. Katherine Duncan-Jones [in *Ungentle Shakespeare*] has made Shakespeare out to be a very ruthless figure, and others make him sound cagey and careful. It is noteworthy that artistically his is one of the most eventful lives ever, but personally he really did manage to keep his nose down.

Bate: Yes, keeping his head down and his nose clean. One of the early anecdotes about Shakespeare which circulated in the theater world, and quite often theater anecdotes can be trusted, was that he wasn't very sociable. It is notable in some of those poems that people like Beaumont and Jonson write about the Mermaid Tavern: you do have a very strong sense of the sociability of people in the theater world. People in the theater world always go to the pub after the show! But the anecdote said that Shakespeare, when invited for a night in the tavern, would often plead that he wasn't feeling well and just stay at home. I do think he seems to have been quite a solitary figure. There are quite a few references to him, going back to the defense of Shakespeare after

Greene attacks him the *The Groats-Worth of Wit*: they always mention his genteel manner, his grace, but people don't seem to speak of him in terms of warmth and sociability.

Consider the very fact that he made that very shrewd business decision to invest as a shareholder in the Lord Chamberlain's Men. The other actors went with their share of the profits, they tended to buy themselves nice homes in smart London suburbs, away from the plague but close to town. Shakespeare, until the very end of his life, never buys property in London. He's investing in property back home. And if he's investing that much in property back home he must be spending a fair bit of time back home.

So it was that thought that led me in the *Soul of the Age* book to think about a Shakespeare who was semi-detached from London, semi-detached from his own theater company. I was just very struck, piecing together the bits of evidence that we have, that they actually can be interpreted rather differently from the conventional narrative of Shakespeare's life. The conventional narrative has "Shakespeare retires to Stratford in 1611, 1612," but actually looking at his disappearance around 1606, 1607, from the records of the players in the Lord Chamberlain's Men, by then the King's Men, knowing also that the theaters were closed for plague quite a lot of the time during those Jacobean years, looking at the slowing in the rate of production of his plays but the increasing length of plays like *Lear*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Coriolanus*, I suggested an alternative model where Shakespeare semi-retires to Stratford much earlier than we've imagined, maybe just a couple of years into the reign of King James, slows his rate of production, spends more time engaged in his property deals and financial speculation in the provinces, but does continue writing. And of course it's not true that he retired in 1611. He buys that London property in 1613, and he's co-writing *Henry VIII*, *Two Noble Kinsmen*, *Cardenio*, in 1612, 1613, 1614. So that was a rather different model of Shakespeare's development.

And in some senses it goes with the idea of his elusiveness, his ability to keep out of trouble. Because there were some moments of real danger. I write at length in *Soul of the Age* of the performance of *Richard II* that would have been potentially fatal for Shakespeare and his theater company, the performance commissioned by the Earl of Essex, and there are other examples where things could easily have gone a little bit wrong. If one thinks, for example, of the Bishops' ban on satiric and erotic poetry in 1599, if, say, more of Shakespeare's sonnets had been published by then, he could well have been in trouble over the homoeroticism of the sonnets, but no, he kept the

sonnets privately circulated. Similarly, there was the great controversy over the play that his company put on called *The Tragedy of Gowrie*, which was about this plot against King James when he was king of Scotland. It was closed down after a couple of performances. You just think, "Why did Shakespeare let the company even put on two performances of that play?"

Spiro: A question about the early part of Shakespeare's life. You've written in several places about what you call "the Tudor educational revolution." I've not seen this as emphasized in other people's work. I do see in your work how crucial it was for the Earl of Leicester to institute a humanistic education to be available for the boys of the middle class. This fosters the generation that then follows. I would like to know if you have more to say about that, and of course also while I mention this I can't help but think that you're making a statement about education now.

Bate: You're absolutely right. On that move, Lisa Jardine has co-written a book called *From Humanism to the Humanities*. I do think our defense of the humanities, which I'm sure we'll come on to, follows in a direct line from what I call the "the Tudor educational revolution." I think it's enormously important. One of the things that makes me so angry about the so-called anti-Stratfordians is this idea that Shakespeare's plays must have been written by an aristocrat, like the Earl of Oxford, who didn't actually go to school!

The characteristics of Shakespeare's plays are entirely consistent with those of a grammar school education, as are those of so many of the other dramatists of his period. This pattern of the explosion of grammar schools, which really begins in the short, difficult reign of King Edward [VI], it's bound up with Protestantism, but it's also bound up with the so-called Tudor revolution in government. When I use that phrase, "the Tudor educational revolution," I'm alluding to Geoffrey Elton's idea of the Tudor revolution in government. The detail has been contested, the extent to which Thomas Cromwell was the architect of the whole thing has been argued about, but the fact is that the mid-sixteenth century does mark a period of extraordinary change in both local government, national government, the beginnings of what we would now call an administration or civil service, the beginnings of a more recognizably modern legal system: that was how the Tudors governed. It has to do with taking power to the center away from the barons and the regions, and for that they needed a cadre of what we would now call civil servants. And that's why you need education. That's why middle class boys are put through grammar school. I do think there is a line from that right through to the Victorian public school idea, where you educate your young

gentlemen so they will go out and administer your empire. And then even through to the post-1945 ideal in Britain that meritocratic selective grammar schools will create social mobility and bring bright children of both sexes into the elite, into the political class, the professional classes.

So I am very fascinated by that. I suspect biographically the origin of this may well be that my father was a teacher of the classics. He was a Latin master. I suppose at school, as the child of a teacher one is always in a slightly embarrassed position, susceptible to being teased. Traditionally Latin teachers have always been mocked. Shakespeare mocks them himself in both *Love's Labor's Lost* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. So in some sense I'm sure a Freudian reader of my scholarly career would see that being some kind of defense of my own father's profession in this interest. But I do think it's enormously important. Obviously I really started exploring it in the *Shakespeare and Ovid* book. Having done those two books looking at Shakespeare in the Romantic period, Shakespeare in the eighteenth century, how Shakespeare was constructed, how he was received, I then wanted to flip and go back and look back to Shakespeare's origins, how Shakespeare was made, and Shakespeare was initially made in school. And then his love of reading: Ovid was undoubtedly the poet he loved reading most.

That then of course got me interested in early Shakespeare, and when in the mid-1990s the Arden Shakespeare series was being restarted, Richard Proudfoot, the General Editor of the Arden, read my book on *Shakespeare and Ovid* and thought I was the obvious person to edit *Titus Andronicus*. That work of doing a scholarly edition was a very important moment for my scholarly development: my view is that, at some point in their career, all literary scholars should have a go at editing. Because editing, you have to have all the skills. You have to know about the texts, origins and transmission of texts, the role of the printing house. But you also, in writing your glossary, your explanatory notes, have to develop detailed close reading of language, an ability to compare the language of one text with others of the same age. Then in writing your introduction, one has to look at different theoretical approaches to a text. In the case of a play, one has to look at the stage history. There's nothing like doing an edition for rounding out one's toolkit, and I'm enormously grateful I was asked to do that *Titus* edition. And I think it did, along with one or two key productions of the play, play its own small part in a revival of interest in and admiration for that early Shakespearean tragedy, that for generations had been something of an embarrassment to scholars.

Spiro: You are also the General Editor of the RSC [Royal Shakespeare Company] Shakespeare [*The RSC Shakespeare: Complete Works*, co-edited with Eric Rasmussen] and you have done some editing of other texts. I am curious about your process as an editor.

Bate: The RSC edition was an interest of mine, because I've always, perhaps going back to that schoolboy performance of *Macbeth*, and directing a lot of plays when I was a student, always been interested in the theater and always thinking about Shakespeare writing for the theater. So round about the time I moved from the University of Liverpool to the University of Warwick, I was asked to go on the board of the Royal Shakespeare Company, and quite a lot of the teaching work I did at Warwick involved forging links between the RSC and the University, thinking about the ways in which some of the techniques of the rehearsal room could be used as a form of open-space experimental teaching, not just of Shakespeare but of other things as well. And at that point, when I was on the board of the RSC, they said that they were unhappy with their endorsement of the old Penguin edition. It wasn't really to their benefit. There wasn't really a connection between the Penguin Shakespeares and the RSC, even though the Penguin Shakespeare at that time carried the RSC logo. They said they'd like to do their own edition and would I be interested in being the General Editor of it? I thought about this, and I thought, "Well, I'll only be interested in doing it if can be a bit different from other Complete Works of Shakespeare. It's a big time commitment."

And so I looked at all the other editions and it seemed to me that there were two deficiencies to all the other Collected Shakespeares on the market. One was just in terms of on-the-page glossarial explanation, it seemed to me that most of the editions – other than the huge double-column, large-format editions like the *Riverside* – most of the others, most of the readily handle-able editions, were very weak with on-page glossarial explanation, which people now need. *The Oxford Shakespeare*, for instance, had absolutely none whatsoever; it just had a glossary at the back. And then, secondly, I thought in terms of the textual approach, there was no modern-spelling edition of the First Folio, which is really rather extraordinary. And that of course takes one into the whole history of Shakespeare editing. Through the four Folios down to Nicholas Rowe's edition of 1709, the starting-point for editing Shakespeare was the First Folio, the book of his collected plays put together by his fellow actors, who knew him, knew them, had acted in them. But then from the 1720s onward, when Pope and Theobald really get to work on the quarto texts, and one began to see the differences between quartos and folios, through the eighteenth century you get the idea,

very much influenced by the editing of the classics at the time, that the copy-text should be the earliest text. So you began to get hybrid Collected Works, with some quarto texts, some folio. And, of course, there's a very strong case for that, in terms of getting back as close as we can to the play as Shakespeare wrote it. But the Folio is nevertheless the most extraordinary literary monument in the western canon, and delightful as it is to read a facsimile of the Folio, or have an old-spelling edition… Well, an old-spelling edition, I don't see the point of such things now that digital facsimiles are so readily available. But it seemed to me a modern-spelling edition of the Folio with a rule that you only emend where it doesn't make sense, where there is clearly a printing error, that would be a very valuable addition to the body, the huge shelf, of editions of Shakespeare's Complete Works. I genuinely think that ours was the first modern-spelling edition of the Folio since Nicholas Rowe inaugurated modern-spelling Shakespeare editing in 1709 with what, for him, was a modern-spelling edition of the Folio.

Spiro: Two more topics I'd like to discuss. One that we don't have to dwell on is the anti-Stratfordians. The other is the public humanities. Really this is one question: you engage with the public. I recall the film, *Much Ado about Something*, which proposes that Marlowe was the author of Shakespeare's plays, where there's footage of you gardening and containing some exasperation.

Bate: Yes, by an interesting director, Michael Rubbo.

Spiro: In the *Shakespeare Uncovered* series as well, the episode on *Richard II*, you address it. But also I want to talk about your work for the general reader. If a person only has a casual understanding of Shakespeare, perhaps goes to see a movie or a play every once in a while, but then wants to check out what's available without buying a shelf of books, that person will see your face a lot of the time. I wonder how much you see that as a kind of personal responsibility, as well as making the argument in the public square about the importance of the humanities. And you have the edited collection out as well [*The Public Value of the Humanities*].

Bate: Yeah, it all connects. I was talking about my interest in the Tudor educational revolution, and actually, my next book, which I'm just finishing now, it's a short book called *Shakespeare's Classical Imagination*, which is a development of some lectures I gave at the Warburg Institute. A couple of years ago now, they asked me to deliver the inaugural E. H. Gombrich Lectures in the classical tradition, and I gave three lectures on aspects of Shakespeare's classical inheritance. I'm

expanding that into a book about various dimensions of the classical inheritance and how it shaped Shakespeare. So of course that is taking me back to the Tudor educational revolution.

But I was saying in an earlier answer that at some level that must be bound up with my own education, my father being a Latin teacher. The Greek teacher at my school, under the employ of my father, was this extraordinarily gifted man called Frank Dawson, who then changed his name to "Lewis Edward Mithras Alexis": "Lewis," as the Anglicization of "Ludwig," because Beethoven was the greatest of all composers; "Edward," he announced to us in class when he came in, having said he had changed his name, because Shakespeare's plays were written by Edward De Vere, the 17th Earl of Oxford; "Mithras" because he was fascinated by Gnosticism and the Mithraic cult; and "Alexis," I think probably because he was a classicist rather fascinated by schoolboys, and the name "Alexis" had associations with the homoerotic relations of Greek and Roman pastoral. But passing rapidly over that, he was an extraordinary mixture of great scholarly gifts and wild conspiracy theories. So one of my tasks at school was to seriously investigate, could Edward De Vere really have been the author of Shakespeare? So I suppose that's how my interest in the authorship controversy began.

What then happened was when that *Titus Andronicus* edition was published, I was asked to write a book on Shakespeare for the general reader. This is mid-1990s. I think I can genuinely say that there had not been a kind of crossover book, a trade book on Shakespeare trying to get out beyond the walls of academe, for quite a time. Subsequently there was a huge explosion of them. That was the book that became *The Genius of Shakespeare*, published in 1997. When I wrote an afterword to it, for a reprint ten years later, I suggested that there was an explosion of popular books on Shakespeare soon after that, not least because the film *Shakespeare in Love* was so successful, and then there was Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet*. Suddenly Shakespeare did become popular. And then you've got all sorts of books. There was Harold Bloom's not-very-good book [*Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*] selling huge amounts, and then a terrific string of books, like Charles Nicholl's wonderful *The Lodger*, James Shapiro's equally illuminating *1599*, and the list goes on. But when I wrote *The Genius of Shakespeare* there hadn't been such a book for quite a long time. I didn't want just to write a straight biography of Shakespeare, because straight biographies of Shakespeare are never really very interesting. So what I tried to do in that book was partly revisit and popularize and internationalize some of my work on Shakespeare in the eighteenth and

nineteenth centuries, in particular looking at the idea at how our modern notion of genius, which emerged in the eighteenth century, was very much a way of accounting for Shakespeare. But also I wanted to look at how Shakespeare became Shakespeare, so I started talking there about his education, about his relationship with Marlowe's plays, his use of his sources, and it did seem to me at that point I really needed to address the authorship controversy.

So I just did a chapter, laid out all the evidence that Shakespeare clearly was Shakespeare, but also talked about why the authorship controversy emerged in the nineteenth century, suggested that it was a kind of epiphenomenon of the Romantic cult of Shakespeare. Once you elevate Shakespeare to the status of a divinity, inevitably you get heresy. The moment there's an orthodoxy, there has to be a heterodoxy, as it were. Nobody bothered with an authorship controversy until the mid-Victorian period because it wasn't until the Romantic period that Shakespeare was thought to be so very, very special.

But I do think there's a scholarly responsibility towards truth-telling, towards historical veracity. If you don't look at the evidence with hard-nosed respect for historical facts, that's a very, very dangerous thing. And then I think, because a lot of my work is committed to the public square, committed to the idea that it is possible to write seriously and in a nuanced way about great literary texts, humanities traditions, in a way that is accessible to a wide audience, given that the authorship controversy is the first thing the taxi driver always asks you about in relation to Shakespeare, it seemed to me there is a responsibility to engage. And that engagement then does relate to some of the work I've done around the survival and the importance of the humanities more generally.

One of the advantages of British academic life, rather more than in America, actually, is that if you publish quite a lot, if you get a high profile professorship, you inevitably you get pulled into the world of public service. So I found myself sitting on the Arts and Humanities Research Council, which is the arms-length government agency that gives out money for humanities research. This was at a time when public finances were under pressure, and we would have a government minister coming in, saying, "I have to go to the Treasury to protect the budget for my department, my research budget. What do I say to the senior civil servant or government minister who says, 'I don't lie awake at night worrying about giving taxpayers' money to medical research; I do lie awake at night worrying about giving taxpayers' money to humanities research.'" And he quoted the senior civil servant who said, "I like riding my horse, but I don't expect the taxpayer to

subsidize me to do so." This was also around the time that a rather philistine minister in the Blair Labour government, or the Brown government, a man called Charles Clarke, said that "medieval history was merely a hobby, not something the public purse should support." So the Arts and Humanities Research Council asked me to gather a group of humanities scholars and put together a collection of essays that could be placed into the hand of a government minister or a civil servant, giving some arguments and some case histories as to why the humanities deserve public support. And that became the collection on *The Public Value of the Humanities*.

Spiro: I was looking at your *Very Short Introduction to English Literature*, and I felt that, thinking about this connection you're talking about, that there had not been this public engagement until the mid-1990s. That book is not just an introduction to English literature but it also is a defense of the pleasure of reading. I could feel a dialogue with Roland Barthes throughout. First of all, that we don't have to make authors into gods but it is important to know things about them and about their times. But also, that there is a very particular, unique pleasure in reading, and I wonder if for some time one had to apologize for enjoying reading novels and plays, especially if those works could be associated with things like empire and oppressive structures, and so on. You account for that, while at the same time saying, "Not only do I like reading this, but Edward Said admits to liking reading this stuff as well." I wonder what more you have to say about this, this defense of pleasure.

Bate: I have to say that's an incredibly smart question because you've absolutely there put your finger on what I was trying to do in that book, and until this moment I hadn't realized that was what I was trying to do. So thank you. And the other thing that's incredibly smart about it is your reference to Roland Barthes, because you need to remember that I came of age as a critic, a scholar, a teacher of literature in the early 1980s, which was the age of high theory. So when I was a graduate student, we were all reading all this stuff. We were all reading [Jacques] Derrida, [Paul] de Man, we were all reading [Edward] Said. We were all reading [Michel] Foucault. And of all those French theorists, the only one I really got on with was Roland Barthes. I just think that Barthes was such a brilliant writer, and a brilliant sensibility. Even before I went to university, a very clever friend of mine pressed a copy of Barthes' *Mythologies* into my hand. Just his style of writing, his way of analyzing … I just love all of Barthes. Of course I love the pleasures of reading, *The Pleasure of the Text*, and his great book about love [*A Lover's Discourse*] which is really a

book about reading. Even Barthes' book on Michelet is – one of his early, little-known works – a huge influence on me. And he's actually seen most direct in my only novel, which is my book *The Cure for Love*, which is a novelization of the life of William Hazlitt, who is my other great hero. Hazlitt, in many ways the English Barthes, an essayist… just as Barthes can write about all-in wrestling as well as Racine, so Hazlitt can write about the game of fives as well as Shakespeare. And there's a lot of Barthes in that *Cure for Love* novel, which is a book about the love of reading, and how books that you love lodge themselves in your memory and become part of your identity. It's a book about a man who gets amnesia and when he recovers his memory he's become Hazlitt. But I had not seen that the way that I approach this sort of hilariously impossible task of writing a short introduction to the whole of English literature in a hundred and fifty pages was to take a Barthesian pleasure in it, but you are absolutely right, that is what I did, so thank you.

Spiro: I love that you start the book with children's literature, and it was reminiscent to me of the way that Dr. Spock's book *Baby and Child Care* begins, "you know more than you think you do." And you begin with "You already know a lot of English literature. You have been reading it your whole life." You even do a quasi-Bloomian reading of the way that children's literature is a tradition that's self-conscious and people interact with one another. And it made your book itself a pleasure to read.

When I was in graduate school in the 1990s, we would sometimes confess in secret that we enjoyed reading literature, but we felt we were not allowed to. As you say, "the time of high theory," everyone keeps saying that it's "over," but it's not clear what has replaced it. So I have a macro-question about the trends in criticism and scholarship, but also a more local question, which is: When I advise students who want to study Shakespeare, I have noticed that whereas in the past the best places to study Shakespeare were Berkeley and Harvard, but that now, Oxford really has so many very good people, very interesting work is being done by a long list of people. Yourself, and Tiffany Stern, Simon Palfrey, Colin Burrow, Emma Smith, Bart van Es. Is there a kind of Oxford way of doing Shakespeare now, consciously or not? And, also, what do you think of the larger macro-trend?

Bate: Taking the macro-trend first, and again answering it slightly autobiographically, as I say I came of age as a scholar in the 1980s, and the big turn during the '80s, which was obviously bound up with it being the Thatcher-Reagan era, was a turn against Deconstruction and French theory,

towards the New Historicism. I had a lot of sympathy for that, a lot of the New Historicist work on Shakespeare, because I do think Shakespeare needs to be grounded in his period. I have a huge admiration for [Stephen] Greenblatt and many of his followers. Where I was less happy with that New Historicist turn was in work on Romanticism. Because I had done that thesis on Shakespeare and Romanticism, I had always had that twin interest. So I got impatient with the strand of work in Romanticism that was really crystallized in Jerome McGann's book *The Romantic Ideology*, because it didn't cohere with my sense of Wordsworth's development. The argument of *Romantic Ideology* is that Wordsworth's return to the Lake District, Wordsworth's appeal to nature, was a form of reaction that came from his disillusionment with the French Revolution. That didn't actually seem to me a correct account of Wordsworth or indeed many of the other Romantics. It seemed to me in thinking of some of the traditions of both social activism – I'm thinking of someone like Ruskin – and of environmental awareness – where I'm again thinking of Ruskin, but also I'm thinking of the origins of the National Trust and the National Parks Movement – all that emerged out of Wordsworth, Wordsworth saying in the *Guide to the Lakes* that the Lake District is a sort of national property. So actually Wordsworth's development is better thought of as a development politically from Red to Green, rather than from Red to dark, Tory Blue.

So that led me to write a short polemical book, deliberately echoing the title of *Romantic Ideology*, called *Romantic Ecology*. That was published in 1991, and I think it played a small part in the ecological turn in criticism. I followed it up with what I think is my best book intellectually, *The Song of the Earth*. It seems to me the emergence of eco-criticism, along with a sort of broader turn towards place, geography, a lot of that work around the thinking about world literature, thinking about globalization and literature, that does seem to me to be the most significant new approach that's really taken root in the twenty-first century. It is a way of making, of responding to the literature of the past in a way that is simultaneously highly prescient, relevant to the problems of the present, but also grounded in history. Even with Shakespeare, I'm thinking of that strand of work on globalization, the move towards global history, Atlantic history. That's something that I'm very interested in. One of the things that I most enjoyed doing in my academic career was working for Neil MacGregor of the British Museum, co-curating the exhibition to coincide with the London Olympics, *Shakespeare: Staging the World*, where we took the idea: as the world comes to London in 2012, let's look at how London saw the world, and indeed how the world did

come to London in 1612. How the age of Shakespeare was the first age of globalization, international trade, and so forth.

I think that strand of work is some of the most exciting stuff in Shakespeare studies at the moment. I think one of the best people writing about Shakespeare and his age at the moment is Jerry Brotton, who has written so much about trade, globalization – his recent book is about Islam in Britain, really important stuff. So I think eco-criticism and what we might call globalization-criticism, the new geographic criticism, those are really interesting, new, post-theory developments.

As to the other part of your question about Oxford: Oxford is this wonderful, but incredibly disorganized place. It has a federal structure where the colleges are autonomous. So I'm the head of a college, but actually a very peripheral figure within the English Faculty. You're right that now there's an extraordinary amount of the highest quality Shakespeare work coming out of Oxford. Tiffany Stern, I think her re-investigation of the material world of the Shakespearean theater is second to none. And all those other scholars, colleagues you mentioned, are doing really fascinating work. The extraordinary thing is, until perhaps ten years ago, there was hardly a Shakespearean to be seen in Oxford. Emrys Jones, the very distinguished professor, had retired. There wasn't a senior Shakespeare professor in Oxford. I had a very happy thirteen years holding the King Alfred Chair at Liverpool, which is a chair with great Shakespearean credentials – A. C. Bradley had held it, and Kenneth Muir, Philip Edwards – and I had a lot of graduate students who would come and say that the Liverpool English Department is far better than Oxford or Cambridge. But then as if by serendipity, a number of college appointments were made, and all of a sudden Oxford now does seem a sort of epicenter of really interesting Shakespearean work. But it's not systematic in any sense, that there is an "Oxford School." Although some of my colleagues have worked collaboratively, Simon Palfrey and Tiffany Stern have done this fascinating work on the parts [*Shakespeare in Parts*], the way that Shakespearean actors learned their parts, and Laurie Maguire and Emma Smith have worked together. But I think there isn't an Oxford School; there's just lots of very good people, and of course, amazing resources.

Spiro: I see an attention to the original dramatic conditions, not just in Tiffany Stern's work, but many people here at Oxford have a great concern with what it was like when the plays were first performed, the books were first read. But that is of a piece with your own work on reception history and what Shakespeare means for us now. I'd like to hear more about where we're going. You have

been doing eco-criticism for quite some time. You're also doing a MOOC on Literature and Therapy.

Bate: Yeah, that is an interesting new direction. Just going back for a moment to the previous question, I think you're absolutely right, again you've asked a really good question, the thing that does hold these various Oxonian Shakespeare people together is attention the original theatrical context, and then the theatrical history of the plays. That is possibly the most cheering thing that has happened in my thirty-five-year career, is that the old divisions between laborers in the academic vineyard and theater people really have disappeared. I think when I started out, Stanley Wells was almost a lone voice, saying, "We must always think about Shakespeare in the theater." The way that I was taught Shakespeare was very influenced by [William] Empson and [G.] Wilson Knight, people like that, fantastically attuned to the poetry but not interested in the performance. And there was that mutual suspicion between Shakespeare theater people and Shakespeare academics, whereas now, though there are occasional moments of bafflement, on the whole it's a fantastically positive relationship. One of the things that most pleased me about the reception of *The Genius of Shakespeare* book was the way that so many actors and theater directors valued that book. That's meant an enormous amount to me. So that's all good.

In terms of where I'm going next in my work, I've actually got two quite big projects that I'm starting on, at an early stage. One is I do want to have one more go at the Romantics, and the sense in which so many aspects of modernity seem to me to have their seeds in the Romantic period. And environmental consciousness is one of those, but only one of them. When I started doing my prep as it were before moving to Oxford five years ago, never having any connections with Oxford, I thought, "I need to read some of the books of the great Oxford humanists." So I started reading a lot of Isaiah Berlin, and I had not really realized how central Romanticism was to his thinking about intellectual history, political history. Those essays of his that were published posthumously on *The Roots of Romanticism*, in which he says that Romanticism is the greatest revolution since the Reformation, and so many aspects of how we are, how we think, are shaped by Romanticism. I think he's right about that, so I do want to write a big sort of comparative book about Romanticism. I don't want to think of it as my last testament – I'm not sixty yet – but it will be a bit of a summation of that strand of my work. I struggled for a long time to find the right focus to

unify it, but have now come to see that it will work best as an innovatively-structured and contextually wide-ranging biography of Wordsworth.

The other strand that I've increasingly got interested in, is the whole area of literature and mental health. This really goes back to *John Clare*. One thing leads into another. When I wrote *The Song of the Earth*, it became absolutely clear to me that the key writer for thinking ecologically about poetry – thinking about ecology's demand that we "think globally, act locally"; thinking about ecosystems and small communities; thinking about the importance of a particular wood, a particular wildflower; thinking about how communities are changed when the environment is changed, as with the Enclosure Acts – absolutely clear that Clare was the central figure for all this. Clare was at the center of *Song of the Earth*. And then, having done that, I thought, "Well actually, people still really don't know about John Clare. I need to edit a selection of his poems and I need to write a biography of him," because there was no good biography of him. And the John Clare biography is a book that I am very proud of, and it emerged out of that ecological thinking. But of course the more deeply one got into the life of Clare, the more the question of his mental state takes center stage … I'm pretty convinced that he had what we now call bipolar disorder. The poignancy of John Clare in the lunatic asylum, that haunted me.

And again you can see how things connect. Thinking about poets engaging with nature. *Ted Hughes* was the obvious next biography to write, after Clare. I like writing biography, and so many of my intellectual interests, literary interests come together in *Ted Hughes*. He was obsessed with the classics: his *Tales from Ovid*, his translation of the *Alcestis*, and so forth. He was a great environmental activist, involved in campaigns to clean up rivers, and so forth. He wrote a lot for the theater, the radio. So many strands of my work came together in him. When I first began reading poetry, when I was a teenager, Hughes was always very important to me. So that seemed like a really great project. But of course working on Hughes meant working on Plath, and really reading deeply in Plath's journals, and getting to know more about Sylvia Plath, not least through getting to know Olwyn Hughes, Ted's sister, and just thinking, Plath is just such a brilliant poet and prose writer. Such a funny prose writer as well. If only those other novels had survived or had been completed.

Then one of the other strong influences on the *Very Short Introduction* was Dr. Johnson: it has a section on him, and one of my great teachers at school was obsessed with Dr. Johnson, and so I've

always at some level wanted to write a book about Dr. Johnson and the life of the reader-writer. And of course Dr. Johnson's depression, which he called his "black dog," was so important to his work. So I want to write a book called *The Black Dog*, which will look at depression and creativity, going right back to the *Anatomy of Melancholy*, perhaps *Hamlet*, but coming forward, and just thinking about the different ways in which writers have self-described the relationship between their mental turmoil and their creativity. So that's going to be the other big project.

That's also bound up with some work I'm doing with my wife, Paula Byrne, around the value of poetry – and this does go back to the public value of the humanities – the value of poetry as a form of stress management. So Paula has recently started a new charitable foundation, devoted to a rather simple idea, that the attentive, slow reading of poetry can have the same kind of complementary therapeutic value as mindfulness. There is lots of evidence that mindfulness can work for people as a form of stress management in this incredibly fast, high-stress world we all live in. A poem can be the same thing. It's like the idea of the "Poems on the Underground" phenomenon, in London and many cities, that a poem can be an oasis of calm in a world of stress. I suspect in some ways what we're looking at here is a sort of secular version of what prayer, and indeed worship, has traditionally been. That is part of a world that has in many places been lost. So we have published this little anthology called *Stressed, Unstressed: Classic Poems to Ease the Mind*, with some suggestions as to how mindful reading of short poems can be of value in the doctor's waiting room, or in the hospice bedside.

In connection with that, we've co-taught a Massive Online Course on Literature and Mental Health, looking at a different condition each week, one week on stress, another week on depression, another week on dealing with dementia, and that's had an enormous impact on a lot of people. I'm very interested in the phenomenon of the MOOC because of the way that it can create this online community of learners who learn from each other, who share experience. There are dangers that come with that, "trolling" dangers as it were, but nevertheless it is I think a form of public education that has great value. That course seems to have struck a chord.

I'm about to do a talk for Resurgence, the environmental charity. *Resurgence* and *The Ecologist* magazine recently merged. Resurgence is partly about spiritual renewal but it's also about ecology. They have got a big fiftieth anniversary conference coming up in September [2016], and I'm giving a talk for that, suggesting that in some ways the eco-critical and what one might call the

"therapeutic" approach, they're actually much closer than one might think. They're both holistic, and one is about ways of dwelling harmony with the earth, and the other is about ways of dwelling in harmony with the self. And actually that's a deeply Romantic, Wordsworthian idea, isn't it? Wordsworth's poetry is so much about self-knowledge, but also nature-knowledge.

Spiro: I don't know if it's common here [in the UK], but in the States it's very common for students to rent their books, or buy their books and then sell them right back at the end of the semester. I have at times told students, "No, keep that book, because you may need it in the middle of the night at some point in your life." Many of them have never thought of a book that way.

You mentioned the Ted Hughes biography, which seems to have been a labor of love. There was a public agonizing about the writing of it, and some hostile reactions when it came out.

Bate: Yes, it was a labor of love. The origin of it really was when his selected letters were published, I just read these letters and I thought, "I don't think there's any other English writer, save for John Keats, whose letters are so revelatory of the inner life and the literary development of a major writer." And I knew these were selected letters, I thought, "There's got to be a book, there's got to be a biography in this." I then thought, "Well, if I'm going to do it, it needs to be a literary biography looking at the development of Hughes' work." My own feeling about Hughes was that I loved his early works. They were very formative for me. I thought his work went through a terrible dip, particularly around the time of the Laureateship, but then I was very cheered by and fascinated by his late resurgence with *Tales from Ovid*, which, obviously, with my own Ovid work, struck a chord; and then *Birthday Letters*.

So I thought, such an interesting career, and I knew there were lots of manuscripts at Emory [University], in Atlanta. I thought, "This is going to be a great project." But in order to do it, I'm going to need lots of quotations, so it needs to be a Faber and Faber book so that I don't have a problem about expensive quotation. Faber and Faber commissioned it, and the Estate, which is Ted's widow, Carol, said that she would provide full cooperation, but it was not to be called "an authorized biography." It was "a literary life," not a biography. We talked a bit about what that meant. The ground rule I proposed is that those things in the life that I could demonstrate were formative of the poetry, I would write about. Other things that were invisible in the poetry, I would not write about. So that was agreed, and Carol was very helpful. I went down to Court Green, the

house that Ted and Sylvia bought, where Carol still lives, and she showed me around. She gave me photocopies of vast numbers of manuscripts, and then permission to see all the manuscripts in Emory and the second archive that was just being catalogued at the British Library. A daunting task.

I spent a year reading as many of the manuscripts as I could, as well as working through all of Hughes' hundred or so books, and then carried on with the research while thinking about the structural problems of the biography. Where retrospective personal writing is such an important part of the story, it's a very difficult thing to structure biographically. I discovered in the archive he'd been working on those Birthday Letter poems for nearly 30 years. So you're talking about events that take place in the late 1950s, poems written variously in the 1970s and '80s, but only published at the very end of his life in 1998. Where do you put them in the structure? I was wrestling with all that. I then got this new job running an Oxford college, which is a fairly time-consuming operation. So I found that I had to ask Faber for a year's extension. Faber were relaxed about that but I had said that I would show draft chapters to them, for them to be happy that the book was having the shape and taking the progression that they and the Estate wanted. They asked to see some chapters, but I still hadn't had the chance to write any chapters.

And then, in one of those strange ironies, I was just about to send off about a hundred pages of draft material, just finalizing it over Christmas 2013, when a letter came in from Faber saying that the Estate had decided to withdraw its cooperation, and obviously what that meant was that Faber couldn't do the book. I sent the chapters down to the Estate anyway in the hope that perhaps they might change their minds, but they didn't. So I was then in this position of having to think about the book rather differently because I knew that without the permission of the Estate, the quotation would have to be much more selective. It would have to fall within the remit of quotation that was not substantial – "substantial" is in quotation marks, it's a key legal word – or that fell within the provision of what in the UK is called "fair dealing," and in the US is called "fair use." That rather changed the nature of the book.

It was also the case that since the Faber contract was canceled, if the book was to be done, it would have to be done with a trade publisher who would not be likely to want me to exclude some of the biographical material that was very significant for Hughes' life but that perhaps a purely literary biography could legitimately have omitted. So when the book eventually came out, there were

some passages, not that many, but some passages, about Hughes' extramarital sexual relationships, which both the Estate and some reviewers felt were inappropriate. My feeling is that a book of that magnitude needed to try to be as full and honest as it could. And it did seem to me that, reading all of Hughes' work, especially reading a lot of his unpublished work, sexual passions, sexual energies, and sometimes even an element of violence associated with sexual desire, was a huge part of his story. If it hadn't been, I don't think he would have been interested in translating Ovid who is all about those things! Therefore it seemed to me a duty to include that. I think there are profound illuminations that come from a treatment of the contradictions and agonizings of his sexual life. They do say something about his work. The book includes a lot about the importance for him of Robert Graves' theory of the White Goddess, and his own reconfiguration of that into his main prose work, *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*, his theory that the key to Shakespeare is found in the dialectic between, essentially, Tarquin the rapist in *The Rape of Lucrece* and Venus, the fecund beauty in *Venus and Adonis*. If Venus and Tarquin are at the heart of Hughes' vision of Shakespeare, I don't apologize for writing about his sex life.

Spiro: Do you have anything to say about Brexit and its implications for higher education?

Bate: The implications of Brexit for higher education are potentially dire. We live in a globalized academic world where the free movement of ideas and intellectual labor is of enormous importance. In Britain we have the good fortune to have the second-best collection of great universities in the world, after the US, but Australia, China, India, are coming up very fast. Our ability to employ academics from Europe, and especially to recruit students from Europe, is of paramount importance to the future of our best universities. At the moment, students from the EU pay the same fee as students from the UK. They are classed as "home students" and there's no issue around movement. If they finish a doctorate, they can then work in any EU country. In addition to that, the Erasmus scheme of student exchange is of enormous importance for British students going to European universities, learning languages, which is something that is really dangerously in decline in this country. European research funding underpins so much of our higher education. Here at the University of Oxford we have the good fortune to have the largest and best medical school in Europe; it's actually rated the #1 medical school in the world at the moment. It gets huge amounts of funding from the EU. Now, some countries outside the EU, such as Switzerland, have negotiated a role in the Erasmus student exchange scheme and are available for

some European scientific funding, but it's by no means certain that Britain will be able to negotiate those things, and there's a genuine risk of Brexit leading to us very rapidly declining down the league table of great world universities. And that's something that the politicians seem to be extraordinarily casual about.

Our higher education leads the world in the same way as our creative arts. One of the main reasons London is *the* city in the world where financial capital comes is that it is a capital of culture. It's because of the theater, the opera, the music, the art galleries, the museums in London. The new Director of the British Museum is German. It's because of that sense of London as a world city – we were exploring that exhibition at the British Museum – that's why London is the hub, the core of the British economy. The arts and culture, education, universities, are a huge part of that. I think these aspects of British greatness have been sold horrendously short by politicians on all sides. So, I am profoundly troubled and pessimistic.