

Interview: Bart van Es, Oxford University

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Bart van Es is Professor of English Literature and Fellow and Senior Tutor at St. Catherine's College, Oxford. He is the author of Spenser's Forms of History (2002), Shakespeare in Company (2013), and Shakespeare's Comedies: A Very Short Introduction (2016), and the editor of A Critical Companion to Spenser Studies (2006). Shakespeare in Company is a major contribution to the study of Shakespeare as a theatrical professional, showing how profoundly Shakespeare's work was influenced by his acting company, his rival playwrights, and his material context. As the interview below indicates, he is continuing his work on acting companies but also exploring new genres and subjects while remaining focused on the intersections between history and literature. I had the chance to sit down with him in early July 2016 – a week after the Brexit vote – in his office at St. Catherine's College. We discussed his life and work, Shakespeare studies at Oxford and elsewhere, the peculiarities of Shakespeare in his historical moment, and current events. Below is a transcript of that conversation.

Spiro: What brought you to the study of Shakespeare and English Renaissance literature?

van Es: I think those are two different questions. I did start thinking about Shakespeare as something I wanted to do my doctorate on, but I was advised off it and told that it was much better to start in something “properly Renaissance” like Spenser. So that's what I did as an undergraduate dissertation at Cambridge with Catherine Bates. I was at Peterhouse at that time. That was a work on archaism in Spenser, [a topic] which fascinated me, its kind of timelessness. I did it as an undergraduate dissertation, and often those things then just blossom into an M.St. dissertation, as it was called then, and then a Ph.D. So it was, in particular I suppose, a fascination with the Renaissance as a period that gained a new kind of consciousness of its own place in history. I've always been very interested in those kinds of questions, a period's sense of its own period, and overlapping discourses of how a period speaks about itself and then how we speak about the

discourse. So [my book] *Spenser's Forms of History*, it took a long time to turn into those various chapters which are about different modes of historiographic writing in the Renaissance. It grew out of that question about how somebody could write something deliberately archaic, and what they might be doing when they were doing that.

Shakespeare was not really part of that at all. I taught Shakespeare but wasn't researching on Shakespeare. I wrote a Spenser book, and I did the *Critical Companion to Spenser*, and I was writing a larger book – I'm always quite interested in the books that you don't end up writing – I was writing a large book about verse history called *Historians in Verse*, which I've never actually written, starting with *The Mirror for Magistrates*. I wrote a couple of articles related to that. At the same time I got my professorship here, my permanent job in Oxford, and I was asked to do a lecture series on Shakespeare that related Shakespeare to his contemporaries, because people had this tendency to write undergraduate work that didn't really consider Shakespeare a Renaissance writer, or they just looked at Shakespeare studies as a self-enclosed category. So I set about preparing for that lecture series by thinking about Shakespeare alongside his contemporaries: Marlowe obviously, Jonson, Middleton, Webster, etc., and I started thinking about "How does Shakespeare fit into that?" It was a great occasion, where I was thinking about a lecture series that then turned into a book.

My initial sense was, while early on in Shakespeare's career, works like *Titus Andronicus* and the early history plays felt to me very easily connectible to his contemporaries and full of rhetorical parallels and also institutional parallels, co-authorship and so on, that fit very well with his contemporaries. And then later on I was immediately struck by lots of parallels with people like Fletcher and Shakespeare. But the middle bit of Shakespeare didn't seem to me to relate at all easily to Shakespeare's contemporaries. That became a sort of question I was interested in in that lecture series, which I did partly through parallel passages that I would put up and say, "Look at how remarkably similar late Shakespeare is to lots of romance drama that's being put on," above all, John Fletcher, but also bits of Beaumont, even bits of Jonson. And the early stuff seemed very similar. That then became this kind of core question to me, which relates to the question I was interested in about Spenser in a way, as somebody who feels part of his time but out of his time, too. So that was the kind of core question I got interested in addressing in *Shakespeare in Company*, was, "Why did the middle bit of Shakespeare not fully feel like a Renaissance author?"

So that was a seven-year project of reading all of Renaissance drama and starting to ask a very different set of questions about the institutions in which Shakespeare functions. I didn't really know very much at all about how acting companies worked at the beginning, and what kind of archives I would have to look at. So I started doing that, which was kind of scary, because you just think, in academia you get more and more professionalized early on and I sort of knew what I was doing in Renaissance history writing, and in the learned cultures of the Society of Antiquaries and the *Ars Historica*, and I had done quite a lot of work on James' interest in and reaction to classical historiography. So I was doing a lot of that sort of stuff, and then suddenly this was quite a different world, that of early of actors and acting companies. But I decided to follow that up and write the other book.

Spiro: Will you return to the book on verse history at some point?

van Es: I always end up getting distracted by other things. I might. Now I'm doing something utterly different, which is not even a Renaissance book. I am doing a couple of other Renaissance things, like part of the Oxford Nashe projects, and writing about children's acting companies, which is yet another thing that I ended up – that I got very interested in in the Shakespeare book – I thought to do something big on children's acting companies from the court of Henry VIII up until the abolition of child impressment under James. It seemed a good idea.

But then more recently I ended up doing something utterly different, which as I say is not a Renaissance book at all. It's a kind of work of factual creative writing which at core is a sort of biography of a relative of mine who was a Jewish girl who went into hiding in the Netherlands during World War II, and who was adopted by my grandparents, and then subsequent to that, following a raid on my grandparents' home, ended up traveling across Holland and hiding in different households in the course of World War II. I didn't actually know her at all; she was this rather disconnected, awkward figure in the family. She actually rejoined the family after the war but then we lost contact. She's eighty-three and living in Amsterdam and I ended up getting back in contact with her. I did a lot of hours of interviews with her, and went through the letter archive from her family, between her and my family. The book is partly the story of her life, but also the story of my journeys through the Netherlands, tracing that and thinking about the history of the Netherlands as I do that. So it's kind of a book of three things: it's a biography, it's a history of the Netherlands, and it's a book about families and how they work in modern Europe, today. A

completely different kind of thing, which is yet another thing stopping me from writing the verse history book!

Spiro: Does this feel like an utter departure from your work in the Renaissance?

van Es: Yes, if *Shakespeare in Company* was a bit of a departure from step one, this is a completely different form of writing, though it's still kind of archival. I've just come back from two weeks in the Netherlands looking at the files of postwar prosecutions of Dutch policemen who were, of course, the people were hunting her during World War II. So there is a lot of archival research in it. But particularly for her life, I'm writing it in a novelistic way, which is something I've not done before. It's a different kind of project.

Spiro: A project that sounds on one level extremely personal, yet in another way, you're acting as a historian and considering modes of history at the same time. Do you feel you'd like to be doing that, or do you think you'll keep juggling several balls in the air?

van Es: It has changed how I think about my own work. I think I would like to write more for a wider readership in the light of doing that. Partly also in the light of writing silly little things like one of these *Very Short Introductions*, which I think is just addressing people a bit outside of academia in general. So I have another lecture series – my books seem to come out of lecture series – I did a lecture series called “Six Ways of Thinking in the Renaissance.” So that sort of idea of “Six Ways of Thinking” is a book that is again sort of bubbling up, and I've been thinking I can make that more of a general book about what literature is, and how it might involve thought, how literature might allow us to think in different ways. So the “Six Ways of Thinking” include allegory, and how pastoral, for example, is a mode of thinking. So they're about modes, and actually that lecture series had quite a lot on the visual arts as well. If I were to try and bet what I'm going to do now, I would say I'm going to write this book called *The Cut-Out Girl*, and then I'll try and write a book called *Six Ways of Thinking*, which may actually become *Six Ways of Thinking in Literature*, rather than in just the Renaissance, if I can achieve that.

Spiro: It sounds like a curious dialectic of people asking you to do things, and then you do what they ask you to do, and it then turns into some new area of research. You must feel a great deal of intellectual freedom if you get to move in all these different directions.

van Es: I think that is a good thing about Oxford as an institution. Oxford has downsides as an institution, one of which is that we're not really a faculty.

Spiro: That's been a recurring theme in these interviews.

van Es: We just don't see each other in an institutional way very much, though I'm very good friends with my colleagues, but often I end up seeing them maybe occasionally at social events or at conferences. We live in these little colleges which feed us and provide us with nice offices, but that also means that there's no corridor. There's very little sense of a collective faculty identity, which can be tricky for our undergraduates and still more tricky for our graduates. And it can make it difficult for people to develop their careers; people can kind of go into little pockets. But the positive side of it is that you are very free, and there's no Head of Department who tells you what you ought to be doing. There's no sense of a collective faculty interest that would make somebody go, "What are you doing? This creative writing thing that you're doing is very unprofessional and might not work for the REF [Research Excellence Framework], might not fit in with our specialisms." So in that sense it's a great place to work.

Spiro: That begins to answer one of my main questions, which came from my own awareness when I was first looking at graduate schools and then advising undergraduates, there are certain places where, if you want to study Shakespeare, you should go there. For many years it was Berkeley, and there was a Berkeley way of doing things, and Harvard with its Harvard way of doing things. And it seems for a very long time in the UK, it was places like Liverpool or Leeds or Warwick or what have you, but now I find myself telling students that I keep noticing that so much of the new interesting Shakespeare scholarship is coming out of Oxford right now. And that was not always the case. So many good people are here – yourself, Tiffany Stern, Simon Palfrey, Emma Smith, Laurie Maguire, Colin Burrow, and so – and I wonder whether or not this is deliberate. It sounds like it's not planned; it just seems a bit of happenstance. But even if you don't all see each other very often or even feel like a faculty, I wonder if there is an "Oxford School," a particular approach to Shakespeare.

van Es: It's interesting. I think, contrasting Oxford with Cambridge, Cambridge felt to me – I was a Cambridge undergraduate and a Cambridge Ph.D. – Cambridge felt to me always a place that knew much more what it was doing and that had a faculty identity, which was a sort of cool,

“Renaissance ironist” school, something like that. It was very dominated by Colin [Burrow] and by John Kerrigan when I was there, and Anne Barton was still there. They were wonderful close readers with a kind of historical frame. They were particularly interested in rhetoric in complicated ways, always very interested in the literary artifact, but fixing it in reading cultures of the period, and a sort of “Cambridge cleverness” that came with that. Oxford, on the other hand, is receptive partly because it didn’t have that kind of very clear culture, and Cambridge I think tended to pick its own cleverest people and employ those and maybe I wasn’t amongst those because I got my JRF [Junior Research Fellowship] here rather than in Cambridge. So if I sort of think of the people who were there, I think they all feel to me closer to the fit, people like Jason Scott-Warren or Gavin Alexander or Raphael Lyne or Andrew Zurcher. They fit it much more, I guess. People often interested in sort of translation in various ways, classical reception. They seem to me, at least more in retrospect, to have a united way of working with each other and thinking which I think is still very true if you visit Cambridge. They’re closely connected.

Here, it’s not like that at all. Right from the beginning. I think colleges are just institutionally stronger in Oxford than they are in Cambridge. You don’t have offices in the Faculty, whereas they do in Cambridge. Those physical things make a difference. So, “What is it that keeps Oxford together?” is kind of an interesting question. I think that, I personally have been very influenced by Tiffany [Stern]. I think quite a lot of us have. I would rate Tiffany as one of the really generative people. For example, Simon [Palfrey] took Tiffany’s work in one kind of direction. I co-teach with Tiffany on the M.St. I think her completely innovative way of thinking about how you can read the archives, how you can read the material culture of Renaissance theater, and actually bring it together with real thought about theatrical production, rather than, I think, theater history being this complete backwater in Renaissance studies. I would really credit Tiffany with that kind of innovative thought. She is a real current theater person as well, who’s in touch with actors, who’s interested in drama and performance, that is doing that in a way that is really fundamentally historicist, and one of many great things about Tiffany is she’s also very generous in letting other people do stuff with her work. Because she doesn’t actually do close reading, and she kind of says that herself, that she’s in a way not interested in literature. I mean, she is interested in literature, but she doesn’t ask those kinds of formal questions about how artifacts function as things of beauty, I suppose. But on the other hand she just endlessly produces these really major discoveries and

asks some really profound questions about them as well, as she theorizes them. It really invites people to engage with it.

So I've definitely thought that it was actually reading Tiffany's stuff while I was asking that question about "Where does Shakespeare fit within his time?" I didn't have the answer to it but then reading Tiffany's work on rehearsal I realized that this could be part of it. I think Simon has done that in a different way. I think maybe it's pushing it to say that Laurie [Maguire] and Emma [Smith] would acknowledge the same kind of influence from her. But maybe Laurie and Emma are also part of some kind of history in Oxford of doing that kind of archives-based literary work that maybe, and I'm not very conscious of how these things work, but people like John Pitcher, even Ann Pasternak Slater, back in the day, her work on rehearsal, I think it influenced Tiffany. Katherine Duncan-Jones is another person who is very connected to drama and does it in a kind of archival way.

So I think there's maybe been that kind of Oxford empiricism that sort of is interested in asking these local questions, in having a philological, historical way of working with documents that is subtly different from that kind of Cambridge/New Critical strand. So I think it's kind of a mad melting pot that is Oxford. Tiffany herself was very influenced by John Jones, who I guess is another kind of really free Oxford person, starting in law, ending up then asking this different set of questions. So yeah, I guess there's a sort of combination of, maybe a set of core Oxford intellectual modes to do with empirical, language-based history questions, and the institutional freedom of colleges that maybe produce a set of people doing those kind of documentary things that then, they produce a kind of interesting work in a post-theory age.

Spiro: The post-theory part interests me. It seemed that people for a while people became, if not quite hostile to Shakespeare and literary authors, but rather that they were being very rigorously questioned or "interrogated" for their roles in things like empire and structures of oppression. It's not that we've forgotten that, but it's not the question that we're asking. What you said about empiricism is perfect because our concerns have become: "What were those original conditions in which those works were produced? What were the theaters like? What were the audiences like? How did the playhouses work? How did the companies work? What did the audiences know that we don't know? How did it get to us?" So it ties, for example, to Emma Smith's work on the history of the book.

van Es: The history of the book is another version of that kind of materialism. What's happened, at least with me, is that I've been asking in a way similar kind of empirical questions about the performance as object, as people ask about book history when they think about the book as object. You try to think of artifacts as being mediated by circumstances which include audience, which include the material theater, actors, all those kind of things. Various artifacts.

Spiro: I wonder if also all of this is something of a reaction to this deified Shakespeare that we still live with, this "original genius." *Shakespeare in Company* is one of the best books that addresses how collaborative his art form was without taking anything away from him. He did not work in a vacuum, although I'm curious, you bring up that Shakespeare's middle period has less collaboration than many of his contemporaries. We can still speculate about how much of his work includes collaboration from his fellow actors, how much he's responding to audience preferences, censors, and so on. Even your conclusion in *Shakespeare in Company* reads as quite tentative, on the question of what it means to think of him as an author.

van Es: I think my work is quite unfashionable, in a way, in having come to a kind of Romantic reading of Shakespeare through material culture. I think some of the negative reaction to the book has felt that it's a throwback to a kind of Coleridgian Shakespeare in certain ways because I actually end up saying that, in a paradoxical way, a certain kind of collaboration removed him from the crowd, removed him from that de-authoring tendency of Renaissance drama. So I'm actually quite hostile to a lot of the current trends in Shakespeare studies, which have tended to talk a lot about stylometrics as a way of pulling apart the canon. [For example,] Gary Taylor printing bits of *Macbeth* and *Measure for Measure* in his *Collected Works of Middleton*, or people like Ross Clarkson who were very negative about the book early on, or Grace Ioppolo, who all sort of feel that I'm returning to an isolated, native genius Shakespeare.

And, actually, I am unhappy about a dominant discourse which is very unwilling to make aesthetic judgments about Shakespeare in comparison with his contemporaries, and I basically think that Shakespeare's literary work is immensely superior to his contemporaries. I want to stick to a Romantic insistence on the remarkable kind of unity of tone and characterization in Shakespeare that I don't find in Shakespeare's contemporaries. My argument is that those unities, which is a very unfashionable word because we're in an age of fragmentation and multiples, I think the unity comes from Shakespeare's ability to control his literary artifact and work with that set of actors.

I don't think Shakespeare just kind of is a divinely-created figure, in the way that Coleridge did. I think what happened in 1594 is that Shakespeare was shocked out of a fairly conventional Renaissance humanist arc, which did involve collaboration, it involved a kind of *imitatio*-based creativity, into this amazing hybrid of native drama, of the *Arden of Faversham* kind, and that much more elite humanist culture. I think he had that learned culture behind him but he joined a set of actors who were really from much more of that kind of native traveling-player tradition and that he suddenly had this new kind of control over his work and that from that came a really different form of drama from his contemporaries. I think it's always a kind of dangerous thing to start thinking yourself into the mind of Shakespeare – “What did Shakespeare think he was doing?” – but I don't think that Shakespeare was somebody who was just playing to the market.

I think there is a really profound sense of intellectual experimentation and interest in the human that you get in Shakespeare that is a product of that special kind of culture that I was also trying to replicate but never had the institutional ability to do that. So I always sort of feel that, though I've learned a huge amount from, say, the way that Arden 3 now packages Shakespeare, always in multiple texts and refusing to make any judgments on which is a superior text, I think there is a kind of loss that comes from that way of thinking about literary work that always thinks about, say, *Lear* as split between a history and a tragedy, or *Hamlet* as existing in all these multiple forms, and that is as interested in Quarto 1 *Hamlet* as Quarto 2 *Hamlet*. I really respect that work but I also kick against it, because I think why I'm interested in Shakespeare is he did something transcendently beautiful and I've always been kind of interested in those old-fashioned questions, in spite of an apparent academic culture which on the whole isn't very interested in those questions.

Spiro: You said, “interest in the human.” One thing that has emerged in these interviews is the prior generation's reading of not just Shakespeare but all literature had gotten incredibly political, and we are less obviously political but there's a very subtle ethical reading of Shakespeare going on right now. We ask questions of empathy and recognition and attentiveness to human pain. Whereas there was an arch-ironic reading of, say, *King Lear*, now we can admit that the play is supposed to make you weep.

van Es: Yeah, exactly. I'm by no means alone in it. There is another clear trend that sometimes goes under an umbrella of eco-criticism, or a turn back to the aesthetic, or that whole ethical movement. I am very interested in those kind of questions. That sort of sense that Simon talks

about, “possibility” in Shakespeare. So, yeah, I’m very interested in trying to fit my kind of work into those frames, and to acknowledge that that specialness of that literature.

We had Derek Attridge here as a visiting fellow last term and Attridge’s kind of big questions have always been “What is the literary?” I really enjoyed talking to him about that, actually being resistant to – there are patterns of resistance out there – but a slight resistance to an interesting other trend in the discipline which is to endlessly expand the canon and start getting very interested in big data and collecting huge amounts of information out of the ’70s, those kinds of things, which is all kind of interesting but deliberately excludes value-judgments from how you bring work together, how you edit it. So lots of interesting editorial projects, like, say, Colin Burrow’s Oxford edition of Shakespeare, is interested in bringing things together that were published with Shakespeare and saying, “We’re going to publish the whole of *The Passionate Pilgrim*, because it tells you about this.” Colin was always really key to me in being interested in the aesthetic. I think Colin’s always been really interested in that, and he writes so well on literary effects. So I think there are people who are asking those kind of questions, from a cognitive science point of view; from a philosophical point of view; from a sort of return of theory, Adorno-led, eco-criticism that thinks about the text as some kind of environment that one does not want to violate with the act of criticism. So I would never talk in quite that high-falutin a term, it never sits easily with me, but I am interested in those kinds of questions.

Spiro: This sounds like a good bridge to your new project.

van Es: Yeah, I think because I’m concerned with the literary artifact I’m trying to create one as well, in my modest way, a work that is consciously literary and will come out with publishers outside of academic publishing. It needs to fit that mode of writing.

Spiro: You mentioned thinking about a more public audience. I spotted this in your *Very Short Introduction to Shakespeare’s Comedies*, which is, by definition, meant for a larger audience without a high level of familiarity with the subject matter. You also showed a casualness in an interview where you compared Shakespeare and Woody Allen,¹ and you have the section in the comedies book about how the plays really are set in something like American high schools. As a graduate of an American high school, I can vouch for that. You’re not wrong! In a “Very Short Introduction,” you can’t go long into anything, but you say that the understanding of gender in

Shakespeare's time and in his works, his views of gender and sexuality are a bit less flexible and a bit more flexible than our own. Can you expand on that as well as what you call the "dream-like worlds" of Shakespeare's comedies? The comedies are set in several places at once, while the histories and tragedies are trapped in particular places. The comedies have this elasticity, this "light and purposeless wit" as you call it, and this greater flexibility about things like gender and sexuality.

van Es: I started that book by asking that kind of question – "How do you define Shakespearean comedy?" – and on one hand it seems this endlessly expandable term that then also shrinks to nothing if you start setting a set of rules, and you start asking "Which are the really festive Shakespearean comedies?" But then I thought, actually, having pondered it for quite a while, I thought there are these five unifying ways of thinking about what Shakespearean comedy is, so I have the category of World, the category of Wit, and to go to your first question, thinking about Love – and, as part of that, thinking about gender – before going on to Time and finally Character.

The gender stuff is really interesting because one could start off thinking that Shakespeare might in certain ways be more enlightened or non-binary about gender than we are today, and that's what I was doing by comparing the comedies onstage with movie versions of the comedies. If you compare, for example, *Taming of the Shrew* to *Ten Things I Hate about You*, or still more so, comparing *Twelfth Night* with *She's the Man*: you look at *She's the Man* and one of the core narrative concerns there is how is someone going to pass themselves off as a boy if they're a girl, and the gender difference is seen as massive and you have to learn all these things like to strut in a particular way suggesting sexual experience, and all of these things, so actually there's a really essentialist assumption about gender difference in the movie that isn't actually there in the same way in the play and isn't there in the same way in early modern culture more widely which assumes an enormous closeness between female children and male children, and women as a category. All of them are "cattle of one color,"² to quote that line from Lisa Jardine. So initially you might say, "Okay, within that kind of Galenic way of thinking about gender, gender is an evolving process, that its 'masculine heat' is this momentary phase in one's identity that kind of burns out the feminine, but as the flame fades later on in life, that old men might be rather effeminate, that young men might also have an effeminacy, and so a lot of those rigid categorizations of gender identity are not there in early modern thinking."

But of course the other element of the Venn Diagram center that connects women and children and young boys is a much more patriarchal one that really says, “All of these are versions of ‘imperfect’ man,” so I don’t think we should move from recognizing that Shakespeare’s assumptions about gender are less hard-set than our own to a notion that that is necessarily “progressive” or “liberating.” It can also be very value-laden and the place for misogyny, and even though they entertain a possibility of homosexual desire and so on, this is always seen within a progressive arc towards heterosexual and there are inevitable hierarchies that place male above female. So I was thinking about that in that chapter about love, as something that I do think is a unique contribution that Shakespeare gives to drama. Again, I do keep thinking about ways that Shakespeare is different from his contemporaries, and I don’t think you find that kind of focus on romantic love in other drama. So at times you get these glimpses of a kind of humanism in Shakespeare, which is what the Romantics found in him, but it’s a humanism you have to bracket and historicize, too.

That’s one thing, and then to answer your “worlds,” question, that’s in the first chapter of the book, saying I suppose what I most immediately think unifies the comedies is the forest-like quality of them, which is not to say that they’re literally set in forests, but that they operate with a concept of space that is wonderfully elastic. You see it even in the most urban of the comedies, that you very rarely can talk about them as having a setting. I was interested in even something like *Comedy of Errors*, which at the outset – actually if you look at it in Arden 2 it feels all the more rigid, because the Arden 2 notes say, “This is classical, and there’s a backdrop of the houses, and everything plays out in public space” – but actually you look at that play and you say, “No, somehow Shakespeare manages to create interiors and he manages to create actually a tremendously forest-like experience of a Greek city.” So that’s very interesting and that allows you to see these little pockets of comedy within other genres, like the world of Eastcheap in the *Henry IV* plays is a kind of comic realm. So I’m kind of intrigued by that quality of “world” in Shakespeare and also his ability to play with first world against second world, as in *Merchant of Venice*, where Belmont is interestingly different from Venice, although neither is straightforwardly “walled.”

Spiro: In *Comedy of Errors* there are also those cartographic references through the work, reminding you of the whole world, the Indies, America, etc.

van Es: Yeah, absolutely. I really like Helen Cooper's work, who's somebody whose lectures I went to when I was in Cambridge; they were part of a graduate program there, and who influenced me partly because her "Med-Ren" [Medieval-Renaissance] way of thinking was also very useful for Spenser, but what she did with Shakespeare, thinking about the presence of Medieval Romance in Shakespeare, it was very interesting. Her work on *Comedy of Errors* I found incredibly interesting, in *The English Romance and Time*, where she says that actually this is a world suffused with the "cartographic scope" of the romance, even while maintaining this absolutely regimented chronology, apparently, and what feels like a Plautine specificity of space. It's always really interesting to compare Shakespeare to his sources, and go, "Okay, there are parallels here, but what does he add, what does he change?" If you compare it to the *Menaechmi*, actually, you go, "Yeah, of course, all the plot elements are there but the mood is so different."

Spiro: You used the terms "enlightenment" and "progressive," and something always in my experience as a teacher, and you can feel it reading people's work on Shakespeare, is the question of measuring him against us, measuring his time against our time. The bias is entirely towards our own time. So the thing about Shakespeare is he didn't say what one is supposed to say about all the different kinds of outsiders and underdogs of our culture and of his. It doesn't come up frequently in your work but it came up a bit in the comedies book and a bit here in our conversation, dealing with Shakespeare not being a twenty-first century progressive.

van Es: I am always interested as a teacher in defamiliarizing Shakespeare with my students who tend to come in with – much more so with Shakespeare than with any other literature, I find – with a very ethical frame in relation to him: either quite crassly judging Shakespeare for his patriarchal *diktats*, or just flatly celebrating Shakespeare for, particularly, I suppose, an apparent freedom around gender and, to a degree, also a positivity in race, compared to... They're not really comparing him to his contemporaries, but they tend to draw lessons out of Shakespeare and that's something that I'm always kind of quarreling with them about. Whichever way they go, I end up pushing the reverse.

But I think actually shocking students a bit with the cruelty of early modern culture and the way those things find their way into Shakespeare can be very interesting. So, for example, I really liked [Andrew] Höfele's book [*Stage, Stake, and Scaffold: Humans and Animals in Shakespeare's Theatre*]; it has some really great stuff there on suddenly drawing attention to this affective cruelty

in Shakespeare. I remember going through those archives in Dulwich College, and you see this little hand-drawn poster, “Come and watch the whipping to death of the blind bear.” Those things are so profoundly alienating, when you actually talk about a “humanist literary culture” and you notice things like “Alençon and Elizabeth took a break from their courtship negotiations to go and poke the eyes out of a bull and thought that was great.”

Spiro: Cat-burning and such.

van Es: Cat-burning, yeah. And you notice those lines in the middle of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, or various other kind of moments where there are hunts, and the pleasure of pain in Shakespeare. I'm intrigued by those little half-lines in *Twelfth Night* about bear-baiting. So suddenly kind of confronting people with the things that cut against these easy modern ethical assumptions is quite a powerful and useful thing to do, to say, “Look, this is not your culture. The past is another country.” Those kind of things.

So I think those things are important to do, and that's one of the things that I'm doing quite a lot in my other current project about children, child acting companies, which is a question that has come up in the light of recent world political events for me, the stuff on child abuse and institutional pedophilia and these very difficult questions. But actually I think there are pedophilic affects in early modern drama that people haven't really confronted and that were absolutely concrete, institutional elements of theater that we've ignored to a considerable degree the reality of child impressment. Admittedly, we have just the one case of Thomas Charles being taken off the street, but actually those court documents run in for quite a while, the Star Chamber documents, a lot of other actors are named as having been seized off the street. There are quite a lot of references if you run through court discussions about the abuse of boys that occurred within the theaters.

I've got quite interested in the world of John Lyly and the really cruel, sexually exploitative nature of those plays I think has not really been recognized. Particularly a play like *Galatea* which I think is endlessly drawing the viewer's eye to the way in which the plot itself, with its gender transformations, matches the institution of theater which can take boys and turn them into girls, and can capture boys and turn them into girls. That's the most recent article that I've actually finished, it was on child impressment in Lyly and then *Midsummer Night's Dream*, and what that

child is doing there, and how it's being related to, and why are we not more troubled by Oberon and Titania's fixation on this loved boy. There are lots of lies in the play around that boy. It cannot be the case that Oberon and Titania are both speaking the truth about him. Either Oberon is taking that child from Titania, who she has seen grow up from youth, or Titania has stolen him from an Indian king and is wanting him for her sexual purposes, and Oberon wants to take him. So there's a deliberate, and it's very unusual in a Shakespeare play, that there's an unresolved truce in this play about who this boy is, and it's a play that's full of strange and masochistic sexualities, and the child is part of that.

It's a really troubling thing and I found it quite disturbing to work on as well because it's not really an idiom for discussing it. We talked partly about the aestheticization of sexual violence, which I think is there in Lyly, and how do we think of Shakespeare in relation to it? In certain ways *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is progressive in that it might in certain ways be parodying that kind of pedophilic eroticism that you get in Marlowe, for instance, very much so in *Dido, Queen of Carthage*. I think by saying "This is an adult troupe; we don't do that sort of thing," that's partly what the rude mechanicals play is doing. But on the other hand it's still there in that play, that kind of effect. There are still those kinds of jokes about "the body's boy beneath the woman," and actually that stuff is more restrained in Shakespeare than in most of his contemporaries, partly because he didn't write for children's companies, which I think did keep returning to that motif.

That's one of the things I'm most interested in pursuing in that book. If you look at the Induction to *Cynthia's Revels*, it's full of these jokes about boy actors being ingalls and courting the favor of the gentleman. You see it in *Poetaster* as well. These are the questions, and this is the wonderful thing about doing historical research that has an ethical bent as well: you can say, "Okay, as our own culture changes, we start seeing new things in the early modern." Just as the much maligned New Historicism suddenly roughed up the Renaissance by bringing us accounts of hangings and colonialism and so on, and suddenly you can start saying, "Yeah, there is a discourse of colonialism of some kind in *The Tempest*" or "There are racial subtexts to *Othello*," that none of the critics of the '70s noticed. Now in the post-Catholic Church scandals and BBC scandals, you look at these plays, and you go, "Okay, how are children represented in them? What did this culture hide in its attitude to children?" That's a set of questions I'm concerned with at the moment. Trying to read the archives, and I'm reading quite a lot about [the Earl of] Oxford, who was accused of child

abuse in quite extensive documentary ways. The Earl of Oxford who was Patron of the Children of the Revels, and you have to look at those little momentary glances of what is never going to be set out in chapter and verse about the sexual agenda of the period. So I've been interested in looking back at [Stephen] Orgel's work on that. But I don't think Orgel quite asks the questions that I'm asking, or that I'm now beginning to ask.

Spiro: In a way you have been saying this all along, but let me try to get a straight answer about what you see in Shakespeare and early modern studies as particularly promising. What would you like to see people doing in coming years? You think of students who come in and say "Surely the work has already been done," and you can say "No, someone can work on that."

van Es: There's so much good new work being done. I think, for example, religion is being treated in a far better way than it has been previously. Brian Cummings has thought about the language of religion and that combination of thinking about translation and how that combines with religion, it connects to our thinking on ethics and literature now. Some of the best graduate work I read at the moment is on religion in early modern drama, and also in other early modern work. That's a really interesting way of thinking historically about things that are complex, and allusion is part of that. A lot of good work there. Obviously, I would like to see more just work relating the canonical literature to what sits alongside it. There's amazingly little work on that still. I think a great Ph.D., for example, would be on Samuel Daniel and Shakespeare. I'm surprised how few actual bits of influence-study have really been done on Shakespeare. The older default is always to take some set cultural category and map it onto Shakespeare, to say, "Shakespeare and barber-surgeons" or whatever, "Shakespeare and this," but actually thinking more about how Shakespeare relates to another creative presence in his own time, I'd like to see more of that. I happened to see some recent work by Megan Andrews which I thought was really interesting, thinking about Shakespeare and Drayton, for example. She really plots this very intriguing way in which Drayton quotes Shakespeare and then adopts in relation to Shakespeare new modes.

Interesting stuff is being done on collaboration that's on the whole still quite stylometric in focus, and I would like to see it more a little bit escaping that. I'm kind of unhappy fundamentally at stylometrics as a methodology, which is unfashionable, but I think actually the nature of dramatic manuscripts doesn't lend itself to that simple separation. There has been really great stuff written on collaboration, it's fairly old now, the Jeff Masten stuff is brilliant, and people who are doing

that kind of work, there have been a whole series of interesting books about collaboration. I really enjoyed Richard Preiss's work on clowning and authorship, and I think some of [James] Bednarz' work on the Poets' War is really great, what Bednarz did with *The Passionate Pilgrim* as well, or on *The Phoenix and the Turtle*. That is really actually properly collaborative work, to say, "Here's a contemporary poet, and how do they relate to Shakespeare?" And it doesn't even have to be Shakespeare, it can also be, say, Jonson's literary circle. That kind of work has never been done, because pre-New Historicism, or pre- all the theory movements, there was still fundamentally a Romantic notion of the author who was the greater for his isolation. So literary relationships, clusters of various kinds. A big thinker who has always interested me, who I'm always thinking about is [Bruno] Latour. Latour's thinking about networks has massive literary payoff. So people who might be interested in, for example, the *Ho* plays or something, and saying, "How does that collaboration work? What is the nature of the interaction across those plays?" Or, similarly, following some track, which is partly what I was going to try to do in the verse history stuff, on the kinds of conversations that were being had between people like Drayton, Daniel, and, later, Phineas Fletcher. Those literary communities seem to me really interesting.

Spiro: Everybody is talking about collaboration and I still feel like we're just skimming the surface. My last question is about the happenstance of this week, the Brexit vote, and particularly what you think the implications of this week's vote will be on higher education, but also because you're Dutch, I think your perspective will be quite valuable.

van Es: Yes, I am personally, utterly depressed about the vote and I regard it as a national tragedy. So I'm not sure I can talk dispassionately about it. I think the implications for the University [of Oxford] will be quite threatening. It's such an international culture and it signals that to come off something like this is very negative. It probably affects [The Department of] English a little bit less than other disciplines. The sciences, of course, are very obviously institutionally collaborative in the EU. English, partly because it depends on such a facility with language, is actually pretty walled off from the Continent already; it's already a kind of Brexit subject. You don't really get EU applicants for our courses very much at all, or if you do, they tend to struggle, mainly because of the language barrier, and maybe also a little bit but actually European universities are so different in how they think about literature. It's interesting but also leads to an awkward relation between the two. I don't find much connection with what Dutch universities do with English

literature or Renaissance studies very much with what we do. So in that sense it probably affects us less. We really are such an American, a North American discipline, English literature. That's where all the big conferences are. There's always trans-Atlantic conversations, but those conversations are carried out in the US.

But what does that say about Brexit? It's a kind of culmination of a reassertion of the national in a post-Cold War age. We've got all these mini-nationalisms bubbling up across Europe. You've got to remember that it's a tiny victory, really a few percentage points, because Britain is tremendously international, or at least 48% are tremendously international. That kind of thinking about nation was tremendously productive, in that lots of the stuff on nationhood I found really interesting, and again it's one of those instances where literary discussions are opened up by contemporary events. Once you start critiquing the nation-state in interesting ways, you start saying, "What is Englishness in Shakespeare's plays? How English are the English history plays? Why is the four captains' scene of *Henry V* so rich?" So, who knows, maybe the politics of Brexit will force people to ask different kinds of questions about the political aspects of literature in early modern England, early modern England's own sense of itself as an island apart in some ways, post-Reformation, especially post- the loss of Calais. So maybe I can slightly recover from my deep depression by saying it can open up new kinds of questions. But I will do so with a slight sense of... I suppose I've always had a little bit of a sense of being a foreigner studying English, which may be helpful in some ways. Maybe I'm a bit more of a foreigner now.

Notes

1. Prospero. "Becoming Shakespeare (The Q&A: Bart van Es)." *The Economist* (blog), September 9 2013. <http://www.economist.com/blogs/prospero/2013/09/qa-bart-van-es>. Retrieved November 15, 2016.
2. Jardine, Lisa. "'As boys and women are for the most part cattle of this color': Female Roles and Elizabethan Eroticism." *Still Harping on Daughters: Women and Drama in the Age of Shakespeare*. Totowa, NJ: Barnes and Noble Books, 1983. 9–36.