

Editor's Preface

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This is a special issue of *Expositions: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Humanities*. We have chosen to devote an entire issue to a series of interviews with Shakespeare scholars that I conducted at the University of Oxford in the summer of 2016. We hope you find them as interesting and as enlightening as I did.

We always intended for *Expositions* to be more than a standard academic journal. We have our commitment to interdisciplinary work and to liberal education (particularly Catholic education) itself. We also strive to provide content including – but going far beyond – the standard articles and book reviews. We often feature in-depth interviews with major scholars, as well as roundtable conversations on a single texts and topics, symposia on concerns in higher education, and reflections on the current and future states of various fields and disciplines. The interviews in this issue combine all of the above. The scholars all address their own field of Shakespeare studies, but they are also alert to the ways that other disciplines (particularly history and philosophy) affect their work. They also consider higher education itself, notably the ways it will be affected in the United Kingdom after the recent vote to leave the European Union.

Why talk to four people who study the same subject at the same university? As you will see in the interviews, Oxford has become the best place in the world to study Shakespeare. This is a relatively new phenomenon. Shakespeare studies is generally more popular in the United States than in the United Kingdom, and for many years the major Shakespeare scholars in the United States could be found at the University of California at Berkeley, Harvard University, and a few other major research universities. At Berkeley, the “New Historicism” of Stephen Greenblatt and his associates dominated the field. In the United Kingdom, the “Cultural Materialism” approach to Shakespeare had its center at the University of Sussex, while other important scholars could be found at the University of Liverpool and scattered elsewhere.

Then, over the past ten years or so, several Shakespeare scholars were brought to the University of Oxford: Tiffany Stern, Simon Palfrey, Jonathan Bate, Bart van Es, Emma Smith, Laurie

Maguire, Colin Burrow, Lorna Hutson, among others. As I learned in my conversations with the first four, this seems to have been entirely unplanned, and the nature of Oxford itself is such that these scholars do not necessarily see themselves as members of the same Faculty and do not think of themselves as part of a “movement” or “school.” They do sometimes collaborate, as in Tiffany Stern’s and Simon Palfrey’s seminal book *Shakespeare in Parts* (2007), and overall many of them share an interest in the original dramatic conditions of Shakespeare’s plays in performance as well as an interest in the intellectual currents of Shakespeare’s time. Much of their work is still essentially historicist but less explicitly ideological than their predecessors; they write about players and printing houses, less so about power and discourses of marginality. This is not to say that their work is disengaged; another common theme in their work is its humanity and ethical concern. They read Shakespeare (and his contemporaries) with great attentiveness to his capacity to move audiences and remain meaningful through the centuries. A common thread in contemporary Shakespeare is an “ethics of recognition,” wherein we acknowledge the power of his plays to reveal humanity, particular facets of humanity that have been hitherto ignored, and even to step beyond an ethics that depends upon recognition to confer humanity.

Much of the recent work on Shakespeare is both unapologetic and public. Shakespeare remains the most canonical of writers, and for a time it became common to criticize Shakespeare for not having our politics (whatever those politics may be), not being as enlightened or progressive as we are, or to embed his work in “discourses of power” and “social energies.” One can still find this attitude – in newspapers and blogs as well as academic journals – and Shakespeare’s inclusion in university and high school curricula remains controversial. At the same time, Shakespeare is the most performed playwright in the English-speaking world (by far), and many Shakespeare scholars write with the awareness that their work will be studied not just by students and scholars but by theater professionals and common readers. One of the scholars interviewed in this issue, Sir Jonathan Bate, has written extensively for the general public (as well as for the theater) and he speaks about how and why he embraced that role.

It was a happenstance of timing that the interviews were conducted in the aftermath of the Brexit vote, and the consensus view among all the interviewees was that the vote to leave the European Union would be terrible for the United Kingdom in general and for Oxford in particular. We now can see the Brexit vote in the greater context of political upheaval in 2016, but these interviews

can stand as a document of how some people responded at the moment. Perhaps the most eloquent point in the interviews came when Bart van Es said of Brexit, “I’m not sure I can talk dispassionately about that.” He then remained silent for a while, as if to suggest through his silence that if one cannot speak dispassionately, perhaps one should wait until one can speak dispassionately.