

## Shakespeare, Art and Artifice: An Interview with Stuart Sillars

In conversation with Perry McPartland.

Ahead of the publication of his forthcoming book, *Shakespeare Seen: Image, Performance and Society* (Cambridge, 2018), Stuart Sillars sat down for an interview with Perry McPartland. The discussion revisited a number of topics that Sillars has explored in his various publications on Shakespeare, including Shakespeare's aesthetic strategies of transformation, the relationship his work takes to the visual, and the uses to which Shakespeare puts aesthetic artifice. The interview was conducted in two parts over a very nearly adequate Skype connection in the summer of 2018.



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*behind the production and interpretation of visual images of Shakespeare's plays. Dympna C.*

*Callahan (Syracuse University, New York) has written of the new work: 'This is a remarkable and important study of the visual dimension of Shakespeare and has implications far beyond the historical period addressed. The scholarship is impeccable and while the argument of the book is magnificently lucid, it is prosecuted with admirable subtlety'.*

*Perry McPartland is a visual artist and he is pursuing a PhD at the University of Agder. His publications explore the relationship between metadrama and representation in Shakespeare's plays.*

**PM:** Though we're going to be talking about Shakespeare this afternoon I imagine that much of what's going to come up will be applicable, at least in part, to a number of dramatists working in the early modern period. Since that's the case, it might be useful to remark on what you think it is that separates Shakespeare from his contemporaries.

**SJS:** I suppose that it's not so much the knowledge, as what he does with it that makes his work different. Funnily enough, I've been asked to give a lecture in a series on Shakespeare, for which the theme is 'transitions', and my attitude to this is revealing about how Shakespeare's plays work in relation to his contemporaries. I don't believe in transitions as a measure of change – they're interpretations constructed retrospectively. Most historians have completely rejected the idea that something is an age of transition because it's going from the middle ages to the renaissance or it's going towards the age of enlightenment – at the time the people didn't know that. Rather than transitions, I'd prefer to talk about transformations, and this is what I think Shakespeare was so good at: taking a whole series of things which many of his contemporaries, and, importantly those just before him (I'm thinking of Lily and Marlowe in particular) knew about and used, but didn't transform them in exactly the same way, they didn't play games with them to such an extent. In particular, it's the idea of rhetoric which embraces this and all the other things that we're probably going to talk about later – and about which I hope I'll have more sensible things to say. You can see that Shakespeare has what we might call a deep professional knowledge; he knows a great deal about rhetoric, especially *ethopoeia*,<sup>1</sup> as well as about the earlier forms of theatre, Italian comedy in particular, and *commedia grave* – serious comedy – especially. But he separates himself from his contemporaries through using these tools and traditions in a way which no one else did. This stands opposite to the 18<sup>th</sup> century understanding of Shakespeare as an unschooled, natural genius, the idea (based in ignorance, of course) that 'Shakespeare was terribly clever

because he hadn't read any of the classics'. Instead of that, it's quite clear that he knew of all these forms, but he broke all the rules in a very deliberative and imaginative way, drawing things together in a way that others at that time didn't. I think that is both the answer to your question, and you'll forgive me for saying so, much more important in a larger sphere.

**PM:** Let's then explore further Shakespeare's relation to rhetoric. I remember once in passing you saying to me 'rhetoric enacts ideology' – it's a pithy phrase and has stayed with me. And while this is something you explore in your work, you also continue to return to rhetoric as being something that is essentially performative. How does Shakespeare make use of, on the one hand, a rhetoric that is performative and, on the other, a rhetoric that works to impose an ideology?

**SJS:** I think I approach that in a different way by talking about style. It's an integral part of the constructions of rhetoric of that time, and it lends them a particular form. I suppose it comes back to the idea of decorum, the kind of rhetoric that is appropriate to a particular situation and a particular speaker, which of course brings in ethopoeia. For most of the writers of the time, ethopoeia would have been a vitally important starting point: the idea that 12-year-olds in the grammar school are being told to write a speech by a real or imagined person at a particular time and in response to a particular situation.

When we were arranging the interview, you mentioned the 'Style, Rhetoric and Identity in Shakespearean Soliloquy' article<sup>2</sup> and I was just having another look at it this morning. It quotes from Thomas Wilson's *The Arte of Rhetorique*, which as you know was first published in 1553, where he says what is achieved in rhetoric is 'an artificial construction of the mynd'. Now that is a very dense matter, because it combines 'artificial' – meaning a construction through artifice – and 'of the mind' – which is the actuality. I think

that there you've got the answer to one of the big questions that I hope you are going to ask me. That concerns the battle between character and role. Here is Thomas Wilson saying this is what is really resolved, reconciling what is fundamentally an ambivalence: that artifice, an aesthetic construction, presents in rhetorical form the ideas and feelings of the person in the moment. We'd all be a lot better off, I think, if we started talking about aesthetic constructions rather than artifice, since people immediately take the artificial to be something that's forced and fake, and that isn't at all what it should properly mean in this frame. Rather, what is artificial is the construction of the mind, and it's a very short step from that to ethopoeia and understanding the, let's call it, the lively intelligence, the living intelligence – which is what we now call 'character', now inappropriately understood as something continuous in each play. I think that is the key element of rhetoric: its artifice. In my way of thinking everything else stems from that.

As I mention in the article on the soliloquy there are a whole series of these instances in Shakespeare where one of the roles discusses style. Armado in *Love's Labour's Lost* says 'I am much deceived but I remember the style' (4.1.1071). That is very revealing: here is the role saying he is deceived but he values the style nonetheless. This means that the artifice is there but it is separated from meaning (whatever 'meaning' means). In consequence, right from the early *Love's Labours Lost*, there is this awareness being projected into the speaker. Let's use the term 'stage-person', something that James Busimba came up with,<sup>3</sup> which I think is a brilliant term. You have that awareness, the awareness which is in the text, which is transmitted to the audience, but which is going to be an element of the stage-person's understanding of what's going on in what the other stage-person is saying. The process is very subtle and very complicated: to go back your earlier question, I'd argue that it's in areas like this where Shakespeare is so good, whereas many of his contemporaries aren't.

**PM:** Just the difficulty in even expressing that structural arrangement in language points to the sophistication of the aesthetic construct, and how it operates in a way that's quite foreign to the categorical thinking which informs critical explanation.

**SJS:** You asked me before we started about my use of Judith Butler and I had forgotten that I actually had used her work. My reference there was a consequence of the conference out of which the article came. It was about style and rhetoric, and most of the other people were talking about post-structuralist theory. But Judith Butler is interesting because she asserts that character – in life as well as in literature – is constructed not through a perpetual identity but through moments where language becomes speech-acts. I don't find that term very helpful because the speech-act is something quite different. (My two favorite examples of speech-acts are 'With this ring I thee wed' and 'You are now under arrest' ... Nice to see those together.) But what I was trying to do was to suggest that there is another way of seeing the impermanence of what we now call character, and I did that because I wanted to stress a couple of things, one of which is the idea of role. This again comes back to ethopoeia, and relates to something that I've done before: to talk about Shakespearean soliloquy as a parallel to the *de capo* aria in 18th century opera. I did this in the first draft of *Painting Shakespeare*<sup>4</sup> and got a very sniffy response from one of the publisher's readers saying, 'This is far too elitist – nobody knows what that is', to which my response would be, 'Well, it's about time you learnt'. The point about 18th century aria is that it is very much concentrated on the situation and not on a character. It is essentially static – because it's a *de capo* aria it starts with a passage about the situation, then comes a middle section that perhaps suggests a response or future action, and then it repeats the first section: essentially, then, it doesn't move. You end up in the same situation as at the beginning, which means that it's very much

concerned with situation – without character. When a Shakespearean soliloquy is seen in parallel to this form, the notion of ‘character’ recedes.

**PM:** Wouldn’t you say that the soliloquies move?

**SJS:** I’m not sure that they do, because they are about situation. In that article I give three examples of different kinds of soliloquy and trace the manner of the form’s development as the canon proceeds. The two early ones that I discuss are fundamentally ethopoeic, while the last, Leontes’ speech from the close of scene two in *The Winter’s Tale*, the one beginning ‘Inch-thick, knee-deep ...’ (1.2.184-205),<sup>5</sup> can, I think, be considered an extension of ethopoeia; you can see the mind moving in response to the situation. But even here, it does not direct the future action.

When it comes to *Hamlet*, as you yourself have elsewhere remarked, stasis itself becomes one of the major thrusts of the play. And once again, we must remember that what is happening is an engagement with an earlier tradition, particularly, we must assume, with the *Ur-Hamlet*, and also, of course, with earlier tragedy. That is to say, the revenge tragedy – in which the initial crime is disclosed, the motive defined and then the rest is devoted to gaining revenge. But Hamlet doesn’t do that; he refuses to accept the ‘role’, and the rest of the play really is sorting out what is going to happen as a result of that refusal – and the conclusion is wonderfully ironic because it achieves what would be achieved in a traditional revenge tragedy, anyhow. Again, this is Shakespeare inheriting a form, and utilizing it, but refusing to have it unfold according to convention.

A consequence of all this discussion is that all of the criticism that says Hamlet is the first renaissance man who understands his own identity and the responsibilities that it produces doesn’t really make sense to me. First of all, because I’m always very dubious about

claims for the first appearance of a concept of any kind, least of all one of complex ideas of personal identity, and secondly, because that isn't a very good reading of what goes on in the play. The fact that we don't know about the assumed madness, the 'antic disposition' (1.5.170) and its consequences, is part of the art; it is a stage-person adopting another persona. This is very confusing for everybody else on stage, and, if it's going to be confusing for the other stage-persons, it must to some degree be confusing to those watching the play, even though they are told what is happening, because the whole basis of the play is that the audience members believe what is being said, and with it, the role saying, 'You mustn't believe what I am saying'.

**PM:** Do you think the Jacobethan audiences had a greater capacity to entertain this sort of ambivalence?

**SJS:** Yes, absolutely; and coupled with it is the fact that they must have been very subtle in their understanding in what was going on in the stage. For a start they had to understand very complicated plots and make sense of who is who. There was a performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in Bergen. I don't know if you saw that one? – They played a wonderful game with this because they had the young lovers wearing different colour hats so that you could actually tell which roles were which. Brilliant, but Shakespeare's audience presumably didn't need that.

**PM:** Maybe on Shakespeare's stage the female lovers might have been differentiated by a tall Helena and small Hermia?

**SJS:** But if you read that it doesn't necessarily make much sense because how do we know that the comparative heights of the two ('She was a vixen when she went to school' (3.2.324) and all of the rest it) would work?- and of course it doesn't work at all if you *read* the play.

**PM:** ... And also you've got fairies that are small enough that a bumblebee's honey bag is sufficient to thoroughly drench them- and which were, of course, played by boys or younger men. Yes, throughout the play scale is playfully problematic.

**SJS:** Yes – and I think that the *Dream* is the most perfect exploration of that. Exploration not explication because we're asked to believe in these artifices... which are not visible because, as you say, the fairies are quite clearly much bigger than a bee's honey-bag. And then the whole thing is wonderfully undermined at the very end. – Or is it? Because in order to see that the mechanicals are completely messing up everything we have to believe in the most genuine mechanicals.

**PM:** It's instructive, I think, to look at the uses to which Shakespeare puts meta-reference and compare these with the preferred strategies by which contemporary work makes use of the same effect. Often present-day meta-reference seems content to do little more than mark up the artificial position that it occupies as an artwork, and having established this effect of disengagement, to stop there. But Shakespeare seems to work it the other way so that we're reinvested, so that we're seduced into making an investment in something we already know is fictional.

**SJS:** I think that's right, and it goes back to something I mentioned in the article we've been talking about: 'The result is the paradox that psychological penetration becomes greater at the

same time as the artifice of literary and theatrical construction becomes more evident'. And its then that the article goes on to introduce 'the artificial construction of the mynd'. What I'm talking about there is the fact that the later plays – and, perhaps, even some of the earlier ones – move towards an artifice where any semblance of reality just goes out the window.

Think about *The Winter's Tale* here. People complain, 'Why is there sixteen years gaps in the middle? Where was Hermione all that time?' Yet despite such a construction, at the play's end the scene of her 'resurrection' is itself astonishingly moving. It's the avoidance of the second death – something which goes back to Orpheus and Eurydice, and that story must be one of the powerful underlayers, if you like, of the play. There's this unbelievably silly discussion in one current edition of *Hamlet* – where the editor says, 'Well, this is a very beautiful speech about Ophelia's drowning, but how do the play figures know about it? Was Gertrude there?' For crying out loud – we don't know. And that's what makes it what it is. What's Shakespeare going to do? Have a messenger arriving and saying, 'We've just heard ...'. You know, one day there's probably going to be a production of the play with surtitles explaining who was present ... But it's according to these elisions of knowledge that all the plays unfold, and by which, seemingly paradoxically, they become much more affecting. Take for example, a line like 'an envious sliver broke' (4.7.145). Now, that's enormously powerful – not leaving aside the fact that we're compelled to ask, 'what the dickens is an envious sliver?' Very often some of the most powerful speeches have language in them that doesn't actually make a lot of sense. 'Take arms against a sea of troubles' (3.1.59). Arms against a sea? Rhetoric would have taught Shakespeare not to use such mixed metaphors, but he does so all the same, and this points to a level of artifice which I think raises him above his peers.

**PM:** Just to continue with *Hamlet*, and your point about a deliberate artifice. Now I don't remember if this is something I've noted myself, or if I'm repeating somebody else's observation, but in the first folio – in what has subsequently been designated act 2, scene 2, Hamlet is given the stage direction, '*Enter Hamlet reading on a Booke*' (1202sd). This is the scene directly before the 'To be or not to be' speech, which suggests that that he may still be holding the book for that speech. And I wonder if the 'To be or not to be' speech is played as a self-conscious rhetorical exercise in response to something in the book; the speech's opening words even sound somewhat akin to the initial phrase that 16<sup>th</sup> century textbooks of rhetorical instruction would supply the student with as a prompt to composition and performance. If this was how the scene originally unfolded, it would underline the speech as being not an exploration of 'self', but a rhetorical exercise – an 'artificial construction of mynd' as you have it. Also, in the same speech he ruminates on the mystery of what might happen after we die; and the speech signally fails to contemplate the experience which would lend such a contemplation matter and urgency: the fact that in the play's first scene he met with the ghost of his father. Again, it's an observation that moves the speech away from being an unfolding of a 'self' that is all of a piece continuous and coherent, and instead points to the artificial construction of Hamlet. It's strange; the speech seems to me to mark up – emphatically – its artifice, its theatricality, and yet there remains a kind of consensus that it represents a genuine and profound psychological exploration that engenders the 'individual self'.

**SJS:** Well, its extraordinary how people will do this and it's the triumph, I would argue, of two things. One is the triumph of historical periodization, which is extremely damaging when it comes to Shakespeare because he is mingling so many different periods and styles and everything else together. And, at the same time, it's this willingness to see what happens in

the theatre as events of real people. You can't deny that completely (although I have tried to do that...it's so much fun to do at a conference...), but Shakespeare's audience must have been able to look at a play and make sense of all of these artifices and metatheatrical references, but also to be deeply moved by what is going on in the action. One of the ways that I try to make sense of that is that you're not actually responding to the emotions of those stage-persons, you are responding to similar emotions which you may have experienced or something you can imagine to be part of. For the Elizabethan audience, of course, it would have been much easier to sympathize with death and violence and all kinds of other extreme things. I once did a series of adult lectures on metaphysical poetry in Cambridge and one of the people there, who must have been in her forties or fifties, said 'Why are all these poems about death?' And I, perhaps rather flippantly, said 'Well, there was more of it about then'. Then something very interesting happened. One of the other members of the class, who was a clergyman said, 'You don't realize how many people nowadays get to their fifties without having experienced the death of a close relative'. That is, of course, wonderful in one sense, but in another it's also quite shocking. He was saying that most of his work is bereavement counselling for people who are my age whose parents are dying. That is something that traditional history, traditional literary criticism, certainly performance studies, doesn't engage with – and which I think we have to do. It has application even to something as recent as the Victorian era. Think of Wordsworth's *We Are Seven*. There are six children who are alive and the seventh is in the graveyard, so: 'We are seven'. We've lost that sensibility. Even in the mid-twentieth century there would have been a far greater awareness of that. The difficulty of understanding these situations is very much greater for present day audiences.

**PM:** Stuart, another concept related to ethopoeia that I'd like to talk about is *copia*. I remember being particularly struck by one comment you made regarding *A Midsummer*

*Night's Dream* where you said, 'I sometimes think it's all about copia'. Could you explain the sense that you give to 'copia' in relation to the early modern period? Am I correct in thinking that it takes in 'copy' but extends beyond this to something like an 'enriched appropriation'?

**SJS:** Yes, I did define it in two words: 'enriched imitation', or it may have been, 'elaborated imitation'. One of the keys here I think comes when you look at the various Italian texts which in the period have been brought out in English editions. They're not described as translated but as 'Englished'. That I think is a very, very important difference. It happens in Gascoigne's *Supposes* described on the title page as 'Englished' from the Italian version. And of course, later Shakespeare comes along and reinvents *Supposes* once again as the Induction to *The Taming of the Shrew*. So, I think that sense of a repeated and elaborated appropriation is an essential concept for an understanding of the art of the period. Also fundamental to that is the whole business of artifice, and something else which you mentioned in your most recent article,<sup>6</sup> the notion of deceitfulness. That is enormously important in *Venus and Adonis*, and of course, it comes in in a much more complex way in *The Rape of Lucrece*. Particularly when she's looking at the painting with its figures rendered in perspective: Aeneas leaving, carrying Anchises, and the ranks of figures. Because of the perspective, they are not all shown, but because of the perspective *they are convincingly all there*. That Lucrece takes this as deceit undermines the whole poem, and of course the whole poetic and visual tradition of the rape of Lucrece itself. This makes it far more real to the reader because her objection to artistic deceit makes her claim to being a 'real person' all the more powerful. Also, it's not just a description of that painting, whatever that may be. It is an account of Lucrece's reading of that painting – something which doesn't take away the idea of deceit but puts it on a completely different level. This is why I don't completely go along with what Richard Meek says in *Narrating the Visual in Shakespeare* (London: Routledge, 2009). He talks a lot about deceit and tries to find

out what type of deceit is being practiced, but to me the point is that it isn't a deceit, it's artifice – and that's the only way that artifice is going to work. Otherwise you just have the whole event being replayed all the time, which doesn't make any sense in an aesthetic construction.

**PM:** That's interesting. How do you then understand Shakespeare's use of, say, a notion like 'counterfeit', and how do think this differs from Meek's idea of deceit?

**SJS:** I think 'counterfeit' as a term only becomes negative much later, so that in Shakespeare's time it could still be understood as a perfectly valid representation. I'd like to rank 'counterfeit' in the 16th and early 17th century as equivalent to what I would call an aesthetic construct, an imitation. 'Imitation', though, has enough back history and connotations buzzing around it already.

**PM:** So, to think of this arrangement as one which is deceitful perhaps reflects something of a romantic prejudice, one which expects art to be truthful?

**SJS:** Yes – it only becomes a deceit if you're thinking about it as a rather bad representation of reality. One of the problems that I have with this is that it is very easy to get caught up in one particular term, and ask 'Why is deceit important in this painting'? I was looking again at *The Rape of Lucrece* this morning, particularly the passage that runs:

For much imaginary work was there;  
Conceit deceitful, so compact, so kind,  
That for Achilles' image stood his spear,  
Griped in an armed hand (1422-1425)

‘[M]uch imaginary work was there’, that line is very interesting. The word ‘imaginary’ can be glossed in several ways. It is ‘imagined’ in the sense of a mental image, but it can also be understood as ‘turned into an image’. This means that you’ve got both elements there: it’s a mental construction, but it’s also an aesthetic object. ‘Conceit deceitful’: well ‘conceit’ – okay, because ‘conceit’ means concept; ‘deceitful’, because it is presenting one thing. But then, ‘so compact, so kind’, ‘kind’ meaning part of the natural order of things, as in humankind, the milk of human kindness. ‘That for Achilles’ image stood his spear’ which means that it is Achilles’ spear that is the image of Achilles. ‘[H]imself, behind, / Was left unseen, save to the eye of mind’. That doesn’t mean that he wasn’t there, it means that he is behind, but left unseen, save to the eye of mind. And the eye of mind is what I suppose we now would call the contract between the viewer and the convention of perspective – and back then, perspective was state-of-the-art stuff. So, I think the idea of deceit as it can be used in Meek’s criticism – and I like what he’s doing there and he does it very well – is important, but its use in this passage is much, much subtler, located as it is within a broader artistic artifice. And it resonates all the more if you read it together with the discussion of the horse in *Venus*, which I feel you have to do. I think it’s Colin Burrow, in the Oxford edition of the poems<sup>7</sup> who actually says you have to read *Venus and Adonis* and *Lucrece* as a diptych, and that makes a great deal of sense. In addition, the fact that these are both so early means that they really need to be read as pre-texts to what is going on in the plays. Moreover, when the structured artifice that is realized in these poems is transferred onto the plays, another level is added to this ‘conceitful-deceitful’ game-play, because, of course, the plays are *performed*. As in, for example, *Hamlet*, where you have Hamlet pretending to be something that he’s not – or is he? Recognizing these levels of artifice makes the plays more complex and a lot more interesting.

**PM:** You were talking about representations in different media there. It's a theme that Shakespeare is concerned with throughout his career, and something that you've written a great deal about. What would you say if you were asked to characterize Shakespeare's relationship to the visual?

**SJS:** 'Go away and read my last book'! [Laughter] I think he knew a great deal more about what we might call visual culture than he is ever given credit for. He was extraordinarily inventive in his use of it, and the evidence of his knowledge is very much there. Lucy Gent's work<sup>8</sup> has been very destructive by starting a school of criticism which says there's very little visual art in the England of Shakespeare's day apart from miniatures and interior decoration. It's a view which I attempt to fix in *Shakespeare and the Visual Imagination*. The exposure that Shakespeare had means that he has the resources available by which he can play all kinds of games with the relationship between different media. You yourself have talked about the opening scene of *Timon*, in which the exchange between the Poet and the Painter concerning the latter's portrait operates to revisit and redeploy the arguments of the paragone; and which leaves the modern reader wondering what, exactly, is this painting that they're looking at? It is a concern that returns again and again, in areas which are not incidental, but which are often part of a larger fabric, and this has sometimes meant that they tend not to be regarded as part of the work's major structure. Think of *Love's Labour's Lost*. Okay, I am perhaps a bit obsessive about the rule of three in *Love's Labour's Lost* but I do think it is very important. We have groups of three stage persons, and Holofernes talking about the rule of three, and everything that he says forms the rhetorical group of three. And, yes, certainly, not all of Shakespeare's audience would've recognized or understood that but a very large proportion of them would have. Even Andrew Gurr is now saying that the idea that Shakespeare's audience was composed of people of every rank is possibly glossing over the fact that there would have

been a lot of very well-educated people there who did understand such things. It's interesting that if you see a modern production of *Love's Labour's Lost* you find that most of the audience is completely astray with Holofernes and the only way to make it work is to treat Holofernes as a complete joke. Holofernes must've been funny at the time of course, but only if you understood that what he was doing was a brilliant exemplification of many of the rules of classical rhetoric of that period. In fact, one of the best places to start learning about classical rhetoric is to read the speeches of Holofernes.

**PM:** One last question now that we're on the subject of representation. There is in the period an urgent concern with likeness, with imitation – driven perhaps by the fact that the visual arts developed a degree of verisimilitude, and alongside this, an expressive power, that previously had been unimaginable. And it seems the verbal arts of the time follow suit. If you look at the forms taken by the *paragone* debate, as well as in the renewed interest in ekphrasis and *enargeia*<sup>9</sup>, you can't help but notice that time and again they stress art's ability to make something life-like. Yet it appears to me that Shakespeare does something quite different, that representations in the plays could almost be characterized as non-imitative, as undermining a sense of likeness. And to that I'd add, I feel he often deliberately marks up the contrast between this impulse to a more mimetic form of representation and the way in which representation is managed in his plays. Is this something that you see in operation?

**SJS:** Yes, I think that's absolutely true. Because, we must remember, he had several advantages – I mean he was very clever in choosing to be born when he did... For a start, all of that theory and practice is out there, and at the same time there is a shift in portraiture. Holbein, I think, is particularly important here. I talk about this in *Shakespeare and the Visual Imagination*, the realization that we're not all stereoismic, that we're non-symmetrical, lop-

sided. And what is remarkable is that difference between some of Holbein's very formal portraits of state and some of the ones for individuals which are – one has to use the word – much more lifelike. There is a sense that art might better capture the actual, but at the same time, artistic representation is still marked by a sense of its own duality. Also, there is the fact that even from the very early plays, and with Marlowe and Lily up to a point, it's possible for the stage people to be taken seriously as real people by the audience at the same time as the audience is aware that this is a fictional construction. I don't think there is any difficulty with that. It's quite possible to have that kind of complexity there and have it all the time. As we know from our previous discussions, it's a metatheatrical quality pervasive in Shakespeare's works. It is an important aspect, but present-day popular art forms have gone so far away from it. Even in early film you get moments like this. There's a wonderful moment in, I think, a *Tom & Jerry* from the early or mid-twentieth century. There's a chase sequence and Jerry runs out of the frame and past the celluloid spool of the film before coming back.<sup>10</sup> That's wonderful, but you don't seem to get that very much in television drama because it is so much concerned with actuality. Reality as it's called. And yet it's so absolutely rooted in convention. As you know, one of my less elaborate perversions is watching the *Poirot* television series because they show wonderful buildings from the 1930s, from Dover and Sussex. It's a wonderful thing, and to blazes with the plot. Here, as in so much television and film, there is an obsessive naturalism – to a remarkable degree – without any attendant awareness that the plots are amazingly contrived, and that the medium itself is extraordinarily intricate as well.

It strikes me as very peculiar that with all the postmodernist awareness of falsity, and the notion that everything is a pretense and that there is no stability anywhere, still there is in the theatre this concern for 'characters', and character study. Obsessiveness about, for example, how long Othello and Desdemona had together after their marriage, or similar details of time-scheme elsewhere in the canon, obscures the function of the plays as plays,

which surely is the main concern in any serious discussion. I don't understand why audiences – and some critics – can't be more aware of this very elaborate duality in the text of the time and also in the perceptual apparatus, and especially the technical abilities of the audiences of Shakespeare's time to accept such complexities. Allardyce Nicoll says something rather nice about restoration comedy – and, again, restoration comedy has a very complex relationship with actuality. Most of these plays were performed on the stage of Covent Garden, where the audience was around two or three hundred and was formed of the very people who would be satirized in the plays. There's a wonderful circularity that the people who were strutting about in Covent Garden outside the theatre formed the audience who were in turn seeing people strutting about on the stage in exactly the same manner as those in the street beyond. Nicoll's main point is that it must have been an extraordinary audience: astonishingly astute to follow the complexities of the plot but also daft enough to think that the effort was worthwhile. That kind of approach has, for many, been lost.

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**PM:** Perhaps we can begin this second round of questions by stepping back from the plays for a bit and looking instead at their criticism. I think that if you looked at what is the most commonly favoured method of enquiry when it comes to Shakespeare today, it remains, even after almost three decades, historical materialism. How do you see your work as fitting with this approach?

**SJS:** I think the short answer is that I don't; and the longer one is that I do, but with certain limitations. I am very old fashioned in being very much concerned with the primacy of the

text and unraveling all of its threads. Because so little work had been done on that when I started with *Painting Shakespeare* it was fairly easy to work out how to do it. I think that that is still my position. The most recent book, however, which is the one which is now in production, is much more concerned with wider relationships – looking at Shakespeare according to much wider frames. There's a chapter on *Othello* which looks at other presentations of ethnicity and rank in the 18th century, understood as a way of getting away from earlier production values – especially from presenting *Othello* in blackface. If you look at a lot of what else is going on, from the beginning of the 18th century onwards to the 19th century, you find that *Othello* is presented in a much more sympathetic way, certainly in relation to what would now be called the black presence in England, and the way that people from other races, not only Africans, but people from the Caribbean, all kinds of visitors, are regarded far more in terms of rank than of race. That chapter, I think, is an important one, in just looking again at how the play has been performed. I suppose really that this book is the one I should have done first, because then I would have had more time to explore some of these issues. But, looking outwards from the stage into the audience is I think a very important issue that the book raises – not fully enough, but certainly pointing out a major circumstance. For most of what I regard as the main period of Shakespeare imaging, also of course a very important theatrical period, England was at war: the Seven Years War, the French Revolutionary wars and the Napoleonic wars. The death rate was extraordinarily high, but we just tend to ignore it. Why was the performance of Shakespeare so important at that time? This is certainly a cultural materialist approach, but with the text as its centre, building on the open-ended approaches of practical criticism, not the much more rigid technique of New Criticism.

It's also hard to place myself in terms of a lot of very recent criticism because I don't know much about it. What is heartening is that there is quite a lot of work being done now on

the visual stuff, and it's actually being taken more seriously. It's still very much to one side of Shakespeare discussion, but it is developing. Curiously, a lot of work is being done on this in Italy. The Keir Elam book (*Shakespeare's Pictures: Visual Objects in the Drama*, London: Arden, 2017) which you are reviewing,<sup>11</sup> for example, and also two or three collections of essays that have come out recently which are quite important. I think that there is a shift in art history as well, in that art history used to be very much a matter of listing 'the great and the good', and talking about periodization and definition through movements. Now all kinds of forms are being taken a lot more seriously; except that, interestingly, many art historians regard the kind of approach that I take as rather unprofessional and inadequate. One criticism of the first book (*Painting Shakespeare*) is that it looked at paintings predominantly as critical devices. Getting a balance between that and their identity as aesthetic objects is very difficult, and something I address far more in *Shakespeare Seen*. There are a lot of intersections with art historical criticism and theory that was being produced in England in the 18th century, that fit in very well with the practice of that time. That's interesting ... but I'm aware that I haven't really answered your question.

**PM:** All the more interesting for not doing so. What are the pitfalls that a formalist approach should avoid and what are the lessons that you think it can learn from materialist criticism?

**SJS:** I think pure formalism can just be a matter of drawing diagrams. The kind of things you find in discussions of Piero della Francesca, for instance, where the composition is explored via the manner in which its lines converge. To me that's only half the job. What I think is important is to look at such devices and see why they are there, and what they achieve. Often in a monograph or exhibition catalogue an art historian might remark, for instance, that this watercolor by Fuseli borrows something from an earlier painting, yet he or she doesn't

explore the significance of that borrowing. This is often enormously important, particularly in the eighteenth century, because it was done quite consciously for its conceptual effect. It's another kind of copia, if you like, taking something and reinventing it as a parody, but not a comic parody, a serious parody. In addition, I don't think you can ignore the impact made by the processes related to artistic production, and the effects of the market itself. For example, there is a time in the 18th century where the mezzotint engravers are so good in England that artists are producing paintings specifically designed to reproduce beautifully in mezzotint. The result is paintings that create the wonderful sense of depth, the silkiness of tone and texture that are characteristic of the mezzotint. Unless we can draw together all of these elements to offer a coherent reading of image – or text – then we are losing a great deal. One of the problems that I find with a lot of theoretical stances is the way that a lot of research is done which begins by asking, 'which theoretical approach are you going to take?', and that's something that I think is based on a fundamental misreading of what theoretical writing is for, and what it's about – but that is another issue.

**PM:** Do you think then that art, properly realized, fulfills a sort of operation which can't quite be contained within theory? That it realizes a separation from theory – a form of autonomy, if you like?

**SJS:** Yes, I think it must do, otherwise you end up with a grand theory of everything to which there is no point in adding, or arguing against. Art must always go beyond, and I suppose I also believe there is some kind of human regenerative experience which art – of any kind – will offer. If we talk about culture, it makes sense to think about it in the way that a biologist will talk about a culture – as something that you use to grow a seed or an enzyme. There is an almost protective element in this, but one that can give very strong results in what we would

now call the art object. I'm trying very hard not to use the word 'spiritual' about this quality, but I think it's there. That's something you don't often get from reading theories – unless there is some blinding truth that comes out from the writing. That kind of insight happens, say, with Edgar Wind, and what I find to be the immensely exciting work of the whole school of scholars that developed the Warburg Institute in the 1930s.

**PM:** I can't help feeling that the plays realize a certain degree of autonomy, and for me, what ensures this is their particular use and particular emphasis on meta-reference. Simply through foregrounding throughout their own artifice and their own theatricality they distinguish themselves from the actual. By self-reflexively highlighting their own illusory status, the plays effect a separation from the conditions that are in operation beyond the stage ...

**SJS:** I think that you're absolutely right. Artworks are always moving away from being definable in any other way. Unfortunately, though, the sense of art as autonomous is very difficult to get across; there is always, for so many people, a demand for the referential. The standard criticism of a painting is 'What's that supposed to be?' – Well, actually, it's a painting. Similarly, early-year students of literature often want to know 'What happened?' or 'Why?' It occurs even among Shakespeare scholars: 'Why does Leontes suddenly become jealous?' He does because he does. We've all done stupid, inexplicable things; I sometimes think critics who approach the plays in such a way have extremely dull, or completely successful, lives – perhaps the two are the same ...

There's an old story about Beethoven playing a sonata to a wealthy lady, who then asks, 'What does that mean?' To which he responds by sitting back down at the piano and playing it again. I think in any art worthy of the name, there always has to be something that is indefinable, and otherwise inexpressible. Perhaps this quality is best revealed in music. I

might, in purely descriptive terms, be able to give an account of what happens in a certain passage, but this is very far from being able to describe what it *does*. In the Tallis forty-part motet *Spem in Alium* there is a wonderful moment when, after a climax with all the parts singing at once, there is a short silence and then it falls by a minor third for the word ‘respice’ – there is something magical in that shift of tonality. To say, that's because it comes down a third and we weren't expecting it is nonsense. And even though, and perhaps because, you can't explain it in anything other than technical terms, it is still immensely powerful.

**PM:** A point that I was thinking about during the break – and which isn't related to what we've just been talking about – goes back to what we were saying about the way representation was conceived of and performed in other media and the wholly different way in which it is realized in Shakespeare's drama. Could this be due to the fact that other media, whether it be painting, sculpture or the descriptions of rhetoric, had a far longer and denser theoretical tradition with regards to the business of representation? Do you think Shakespeare's plays exploit the fact that the medium doesn't appear to be so theoretically prescribed – that drama's representative duties or obligations are not quite so marked out for it?

**SJS:** I do think so, but with the caveat that Shakespeare did know a great deal about the practice which involves the theory of Italian theatre, and that has a lot to do with the design of the plays, their movement – think about the *commedia dell'arte*, and the conventions of ‘serious comedy’, *commedia grave*, for example. At the same time, as you say, there isn't much criticism of Shakespeare's day that forms a dramatic theory, at least not in England – but it is very important to realize that he knew a great deal about what was coming in from the continent, and I think that's something that has been conventionally and perhaps deliberately

undervalued. The idea that he is the great stand-alone English hero doesn't really work. But, yes, I think what you're saying is right.

**PM:** I was just thinking of that first scene in *Timon of Athens*, the part where you have the Poet commenting on the Painter's painting. The audience is supplied with the Poet's rhetorical description of the artwork and the artwork itself, and each unfolds according to the classical representational models associated with these forms. The painting is discussed in terms of its mimetic effect, while the Poet launches on a kind of ekphrastic set-piece. These representative modes are presented according to a kind of self-reflexive quotation, and in a broader theatrical context where attention is drawn to the fact that the parts of Poet and Painter are performances. There's that bit where the Poet describes the portrait as 'livelier than life' (1.1.39). But, of course, the audience wouldn't have missed the irony that the two actors who are standing apparently admiring the painting can't help but outdo the work for 'liveliness'. And, at the same time, as I remarked, the stage action is at pains to point out that the Painter and Poet – lively as they are – are fictions. I feel that in scenes like this Shakespeare is presenting the traditional forms of artistic representation, specifically mimetic descriptions, and contrasting them with the way that representation is managed in his theatre.

**SJS:** I think that's right, and you have also to read those scenes in terms of what Timon himself says in response to the earlier exchange. He isn't really going along with it; in fact, he undermines the discussion in a way which is really quite comic. In that respect, the scene is a parallel to what happens to Holofernes: Holofernes is being ridiculed for what he is doing, but he is doing it much better than, for example, the Painter and the Poet in *Timon*. But as you say, always there is the complexity of who is actually speaking in the play. Is it the stage

person? Is it the actor? Is it the writer? Or is it the text? ... It's interesting, if a little worrying, that if you talk to thespians about a 'text' they get very uncomfortable ...

**PM:** I think when approaching Shakespeare, as a reader or as an audience – or even an actor, I suppose – you need to maintain an acute sense of register. You have to try to train your ear to get a sense of the degree of irony invested in each line. I get very confused by scholars who say, 'Shakespeare thinks ...', 'Shakespeare believed that ...'. More than with any other artist I know, what Shakespeare thinks or feels is almost impossible for me to have any sense of. I can understand what he's interested in, what excites him perhaps, and some of his favourite artistic strategies, but I would have a hard time attributing, with any certainty, any particular belief to the author of the plays ...

**SJS:** Yes – but at the same time, you get some sense of what is going on at the close of some of the plays, and obviously it's the later ones where I think it comes out most clearly. But those who talk about the history plays and go with the providentialist reading of the second tetralogy obviously haven't read the text very carefully – because there's a huge amount of uncertainty in them. And for quite clear material purposes: for his own survival he couldn't write what he really thought, even if he knew himself. For me, the whole concern with the idea that Shakespeare might have been a catholic is a nonsense. Say he was a catholic – but so what? It suggests a reduction of possibilities, in which you lose all of the richness and the wonderful complexity that is present in the work all the time. More likely, to me, is what Charles Mosely was saying in the Magdalen conference,<sup>12</sup> that people of course engaged with religious schism, but the question of faith and identity was far more flexible than some critics have conceptualized it. Certainly, there were lots of catholic recusants, and *King Lear* was

performed in their houses, but that doesn't give us a single answer to a single reductive question.

**PM:** Just to go back again to the first part of our discussion, to what you were saying about the relationship between the early modern and the postmodern. I was thinking that there are things which Shakespeare does which bear similarity to techniques that we more readily associate with postmodernism. There is – to anachronistically call them by their present-day terms – in Shakespeare something like 'intertextuality', there is a kind of non-essential concept of self. There's also this play of continually deferred meaning. All of these are notions which we would associate with present-day practice. However, what I find enormously exciting is that their effect and management is of a completely different type. And I think that is in part due to the different traditions that Shakespeare inherited. Do you see something like these present-day concepts at work in Shakespeare, and if so, how does their operation and effect compare to their postmodern utilisation?

**SJS:** It's actually very interesting that you say that because when I re-wrote that Malta piece it struck me that what I was trying to do there was to use the Judith Butler's ideas as metaphors of something that was happening in the Shakespeare soliloquy and the Shakespearean construction of stage-figure. I wasn't really saying that there is a similarity between Shakespeare's plays and present-day critical thought. I just think this is one method we can use to try to understand what's going on – by saying that it may be rather similar to what we're doing now. I suppose I was also trying to be rather perverse in suggesting, 'There is nothing totally new about this'. But I do think there is a danger of saying that the two are essentially the same, because they're not. When you say that Shakespeare is coming from a different tradition it's not that the present-day tradition is different, it's that there isn't a

present-day tradition. I think that with postmodernism either everything is a tradition, or there is no tradition, and with Shakespeare's period there is such a very strong tradition that you can achieve wonderful things by breaking it.

**PM:** Lots of the 'breaking' today seems reductive, and it seems to close off possibilities – which is the opposite of what happens in Shakespeare's period, and in Shakespeare in particular.

**SJS:** Yes, that's right, because the tradition there is so rich and because in the plays and the poems you're dealing with something which is essentially dynamic. It's constantly redefining itself in the way that the text questions, and – because you've got stage persons there – it is essentially dialogic. There is a different series of relationships between the now, and the before and the ... how can I say this? ... between the residual and the innovative, the traditions of the arts. It is particularly so in drama in a way that is very, very difficult to convey in an academic context – and also in performance because the performers have to make up their minds as to what they're going to do. Think about *Troilus and Cressida*, and all those long speeches – for example the famous 'Take but degree away' soliloquy (1.3.75-185). This very long speech about the great chain of being is even today sometimes cited as the universally accepted system of hierarchy. It's interesting to consider what the other performers are doing while Ulysses is speaking. How you read that and how you perform that is going to change completely the speech's significance. I always think they'll be standing with their arms folded and looking at their watches and just shaking them to see if they've stopped. Or are they taking it seriously and writing it down? – saying, 'My God, you're right!' ... Of course, it couldn't possibly be either of those because they're too straightforward; but there must be a reaction of some kind.

**PM:** There's also the practical business of how the actors received their parts and the effect this would have on performance, isn't there? Whereby the actors didn't receive the whole script, but only the lines associated with their part together with a two or three-word cue preceding it so they would know when to speak.<sup>13</sup> This set up plays into your idea of the play as a series of speeches which are somewhat isolated within the broader aesthetic construct. But it also makes me wonder how the dialogic interaction will work. The actors have practiced and rehearsed their part, mostly by themselves – meaning they've cultivated a sense of how they're going to perform their lines. In the few rehearsals afforded to the troupe, the actor has to pay attention to the person speaking, has to listen for his cue-words. But also, they have to listen to the other speaker in order to work out the broader context in which they are operating: what is happening in the play-world narrative, and how might this alter the way the part should be played? Things which the written part wouldn't in itself necessarily have marked up for them. And the limited rehearsal time, the large number of plays that the early modern actor had to be ready to perform, would surely mean that something like this arrangement would be happening in the performance proper too. This lends a particular significance and urgency to the stage figure's interaction with other speakers' dialogue.

**SJS:** That's very interesting – and of course, for Shakespeare's time we simply don't know. But in a sense, it makes it more like an actual conversation. There is also the question of what happens on the first night, which will surely be different from subsequent performances. Actors will tell you that they respond very directly to the audience; that the timing changes according to how the audience reacts. That must be an element as well. This comes back to what you were talking about earlier – that there is so much going on there that it's very difficult to be prescriptive, to theorize about it.

**PM:** It also, I think, indicates an interesting relationship between part and performance. With something like Leontes' jealousy, which you spoke about earlier, for example. There, it's possible to imagine the actor reading his part, and, before he gets to the first rehearsal, expecting that the play-action will provide a motive for his reaction. And on that first rehearsal, or that first night even, the actors realize that they're in a different play from that which they had anticipated. Not a play that offers a psychologically convincing prelude to his jealous outburst, but a play which is probably closer to the plays of twenty or thirty years ago when you could be you could be possessed by Jealousy with a capital 'J'. That will have a huge influence on how the actor performs the role, and the experience must surely influence how he would approach the role in subsequent performances. Again, it's that double or even triple perspective that seems to be very much in effect in the period. The actor's speech seems to operate as an instance of isolated rhetorical performance, yet at the same time this passage of isolated rhetoric must work in conjunction – a conjunction that would often benefit from its being spontaneously established – with the other bits of dialogue. But it's difficult, from my 21<sup>st</sup> century perspective, to get a real sense of how these different elements cohere.

**SJS:** All this is true, and difficult for everyone because of the lack of evidence. In addition we don't have a vocabulary to discuss that approach to rehearsal and performance, because we talk about a 'production', with 'directors'. Even in the 19th century you didn't have a director, you had a manager, and the manager was often an actor, generally with the key role.

Once you start trying to get a sense of the ideal performance, there are simply so many complexities there that you can never really make sense of it. It's particularly so, I think, when you're talking about an individual play, subject as it inevitably is to textual variants, and coloured by the various productions that we've seen. What do we actually mean when we say

*Hamlet* or *King Lear*? There is nothing finite about these, or indeed of the other plays. At least with a piece of music you've generally got a score. With so many Shakespeare plays you don't have a text, or, rather, you have a selection of multiple textual possibilities. Even then, very often scenes or passages are cut in performance. The events become even more remote if you add in all the other uncertainties – for example, of part and dialogue – that we have discussed. Having said that, I think that, because they depend on an individual performance, those uncertainties are in a sense less insistent. But the uncertainties that are there in the text are the certain uncertainties, if you like – or the uncertain certainties, defining more precisely exactly what we don't know. 'Certain uncertainties' – that seems a very productive place to end, don't you think?

**PM:** [Laughs] Agreed. Thank you very much, Stuart.

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<sup>1</sup> A complex term, with different definitions from different periods. Here it is used as employed by Stuart Sillars in *Shakespeare and the Visual Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015). In textbooks of rhetorical instruction ethopoeia was an exercise in composing the response of a specific individual to a particular setting and event, with one of the more common models being the reaction of Niobe on being informed of the death of her children. It is important to note that '[w]hile ethopoeia allows situational and emotional empathy, it should also be seen as a device restricted to momentary presentation, resting as much on event as individual' (Sillars *Visual* 240).

<sup>2</sup> This appeared in *Style and Theory: Between Literature and Philosophy*, ed. Ivan Callus, James Corby and Gloria Lauri-Lucente (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p.49-70.

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<sup>3</sup> Busimba introduced this term in his doctoral thesis, *Tropes of Outside-ing: A Mythographical Reading of Maturation Processes in plays by Shakespeare and Ruganda*. Bergen, 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. The operatic allusion was duly omitted, but used frequently elsewhere.

<sup>5</sup> All quotations from Shakespeare are from the most recent New Cambridge Shakespeare editions.

<sup>6</sup> 'Political Shakespeare and the Blessing of Art' *EMCO* Vol 4.1, 2018.

<sup>7</sup> *The Complete Sonnets and Poems*, ed. Colin Burrow (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002).

<sup>8</sup> See her *Picture and Poetry 1560 – 1620* (Leamington Spa: James Hall, 1981).

<sup>9</sup> Another complex set of terms, but used here as in *Shakespeare and the Visual Imagination*, 28-9. 'Ekphrasis relates to the poetic presentation of an existing visual image, often but not always a painting' (Sillars *Visual* 28). Enargeia refers to the representational immediacy of a verbal description. The key to the device is the vividness that it conjures in the mind of the reader or auditor, who experiences the described object as if seen.

<sup>10</sup> Rather than *Tom & Jerry*, this description almost certainly refers to one of Tex Avery's cartoons. Avery's works are filled with meta-humour and the camera panning beyond the extent of the film itself is one of their favourite devices.

<sup>11</sup> The review appears in *The Review of English Studies*, hgy059, 2018.

<sup>12</sup> BVSN Conference, October 2017, Cambridge University.

<sup>13</sup> For a full discussion of this practice see Simon Palfrey and Tiffany Stern's *Shakespeare in Parts*, Oxford, 2007.