Stanley Wells
in conversation with Anne Sophie Haahr Refskou

Shakespeare, Globalization, and the Digital Revolution

In an interview given during a lecture tour in Scandinavia organized by the universities of Copenhagen, Bergen, and Aarhus in October and November, 2012, Stanley Wells talks about his own career in Shakespeare studies and discusses past and present major changes and issues within the field, including his own Oxford *Complete Works* of 1986, co-edited with Gary Taylor et al., revision and collaboration theories, global Shakespeare, and new challenges for Shakespearean scholars. He shares thoughts on his own current and future research projects, which include a new monograph on Shakespearean actors through time, and he also comments on the relationship between academic scholars and theatre practitioners, and ways in which to understand the ever-shifting concept of a Shakespearean play in relation to performance, reading, and personal and critical responses. Following a long career of many publications and editions, Stanley Wells is now Professor Emeritus of the University of Birmingham, and Honorary President of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust. Anne Sophie Haahr Refskou is a Doctoral Fellow in English and Dramaturgy at Aarhus University, Denmark. She works with Shakespearean acting and dramaturgy, focusing on the relationship between text and performance, particularly in relation to the actor's body and physical expressions.

Key terms: Stanley Wells, Shakespeare studies, editing Shakespeare, text and performance.

Anne Sophie Haahr Refskou *As a leading authority within Shakespeare studies since the sixties, you will often have been asked how and why you originally embarked on a career in this field. Why is Shakespeare the choice for you personally and academically today? How would you characterize your most important tasks today as an authoritative Shakespearean scholar?*

Stanley Wells Of course, the weight of the years is behind it all. I became interested in Shakespeare when I was at school. I developed my interest partly through seeing performances of his plays as well as reading them. I had very good teachers at university, and I kept up my interest in Shakespeare when I was a schoolteacher for six years. But then I went to the Shakespeare Institute in Stratford-upon-Avon to do a PhD, and while there I inevitably became involved in the Shakespearean scene, teaching Shakespeare, seeing the plays at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, and increasingly being asked to write about Shakespeare, to think about him in a great many different ways, so all that developed my natural taste for Shakespeare, and, more generally, for theatre.

How would you then characterize your most important tasks today?

I am no longer employed professionally, in the sense that I no longer have a full-time job. But I have a position as Honorary President of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust and I like to feel that in some ways I am an ambassador for the Trust on Shakespearean matters. I am frequently invited to speak about Shakespeare in a number of different ways, sometimes at conferences, sometimes in lectures in universities, as I have been happily doing here in Scandinavia, sometimes on the radio, sometimes on television. All this means that I am able both to represent the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, which is a valuable organization with wonderful research resources, and I hope to be able to provide a corrective to some of the sillier ideas about Shakespeare that get around. As you know, I have been

 © CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS doi:10.1017/S0266464X14000086
https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X14000086 Published online by Cambridge University Press

much involved in the last year or so in counteracting the anti-Shakespeareans, the people who try to claim that William Shakespeare of Stratford-upon-Avon was not the author of the great works which we have always attributed to him. I am convinced that he is, and I feel almost a missionary zeal in trying to correct the mistaken views, and, especially, to stop the spread of the heresy. It is difficult to get those who already are convinced off the track on it, but at least one may do something to persuade young people, or those people who are new to it all, that it is all the nonsense that it actually is.

So there is a certain responsibility in terms of preventing young people from being persuaded?

Yes, I think so.

Your recent publications include studies on the sonnets, on Shakespeare's contemporary playwrights, notions of sexuality in early modern England and in Shakespeare's work, as well as several responses to the authorship debate. Are there any of these current or forthcoming research projects that you would like to share information about? Any continuations or changes of direction in your interests?

Of course one takes the opportunity as it arises to develop one's interest in one way or another, and sometimes one responds to external stimuli as I have, for example, with the authorship debate. My latest publication is the volume which I have co-edited with Paul Edmondson called *Shakespeare Beyond Doubt*. This is a collection of essays for Cambridge University Press to which I have also contributed the article that sets forth the evidence that Shakespeare of Stratford-upon-Avon wrote Shakespeare. One is often asked to revise earlier works as well. For example, I have a little Shakespeare dictionary, published by Oxford University Press, and I have just been engaged in revising that for an online edition.

I also have some ideas for the future, of which the one that I am most keen to get on with as soon as I can is a book to be called *The Greatest Shakespeare Actors* – probably *The Fifty Greatest Shakespeare Actors*. It is partly because I, for many, many years, have had an interest in theatre history. I have read a lot about the actors of the past. I have experienced the actors of the present, and done so over so many years that some of those are now actors of the past. I hope that I can write a book which can be interesting and entertaining, but will not by any means be exhaustive, of course, because if I am going to get fifty or so actors, within a book of, say, 100,000 to 120,000 words, that will only leave about 2,000 words on each of them, along with a lengthy introduction in which I want to talk about what makes a great Shakespearean actor. What are the challenges, what are the conditions in which people have to perform Shakespeare? What are the conditions which helped to shape their performances? So, in a way I hope it will become a sort of history of Shakespearean acting, but focusing on some of the very greatest of those who acted.

And I shall start from the very beginning. My very first section, which I have already written, is called 'Was Shakespeare the First Great Shakespeare Actor?' I do not think he was, but I did feel it was worth surveying the evidence for Shakespeare's own acting career. And then of course the first great Shakespeare actor, unquestionably, is Richard Burbage, the leading actor of his company. From then on, I shall go through people like Thomas Betterton, Charles Macklin, David Garrick, Mrs Siddons, John Philip Kemble, Henry Irving, Ellen Terry, coming through to John Gielgud and Laurence Olivier; and of course I am old enough to have seen quite a lot of the greatest actors from Edith Evans onwards. I hope my personal experience will feed the book quite a lot.

Many of your books and articles have been translated from English into other languages, your many engagements take you all over the world, and you have very recently been involved in documenting activities and projects taking place for the World Shakespeare Festival of 2012. How, in your opinion, do these global Shakespearean exchanges work and what is their impact on the English-speaking perception of Shakespeare?

I think Shakespeare is increasingly being studied, enjoyed, used, one might even say,

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X14000086 Published online by Cambridge University Press

internationally – 'used' in the sense that his works are adapted. They form the basis of engagements with contemporary culture and politics so that, quite often, it is not Shakespeare's plays which are being presented, it is adaptations of those plays, which creates a sort of interplay between the past and the present with attempts to universalize the particular, to think about modern society, modern politics, modern sexual preoccupations and social preoccupations, political preoccupations – to think about these through a kind of Shakespearean filter. Of course, they have to entertain as well as to be informative and intellectually stimulating, because theatre is an entertainment business. I think Shakespeare can help people to assimilate difficult ideas through the entertainment that his plays offer, both in the original texts and in adaptation.

So in relation to the impact on the English-speaking perception of Shakespeare, do you think that the English-speaking world is also open to these exchanges?

Yes, I think it is becoming increasingly so. This has been evidenced recently by the World Shakespeare Festival in England – which was slightly misnamed, in the sense that a lot of Shakespeare has gone on in other parts of the world in the current year as well as in England. But, above all, at Shakespeare's Globe Theatre in London, where they had 37 plays, in 37 different languages, many of them in very, very radical adaptations. I think this has helped people to appreciate what Shakespeare could mean to modern communities, even to those who are not accustomed to either speaking or reading or listening to English, or even, perhaps, accustomed to experiencing drama. The Globe productions also feature in another project which I am concerned with: a series of reviews of all the World Shakespeare Festival productions (http://yearofshakespeare.com).

At the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust we are increasingly able to reach out to the global community through such digital means. I tweet, I write blogs, we have the Shakespeare website of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, bloggingshakespeare.com; we have sixtyminuteswithshakespeare.com. We do podcasts. We do what is called a 'webinar', a seminar on the web, when most recently I along with colleagues spent an hour discussing Shakespeare on film, because we had just had a Shakespeare film festival in Stratford. So, the digital revolution is enabling us to be more global, in our own context, about Shakespeare.

Since the 1970s and 1980s you have edited and co-edited numerous significant Shakespeare companions, surveys, and anthologies, of which the most recent is The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare *which you co-edited with Margreta de Grazia in 2010. During this extensive period of Shakespearean scholarship, are there any particular or significant moments of change, you have observed and would like to comment on?*

Yes, there have been a number of major changes in people's perception of Shakespeare. Some of which, I suppose, I have been responsible for, especially in the Oxford *Complete Works* of Shakespeare of 1986, which I co-edited with my very talented collaborator Gary Taylor and other scholars. That is in many ways a revolutionary edition. It caused a lot of shock waves when it first appeared because of some of its innovations, most notably, for example, the fact that we printed two separate texts of *King Lear*. In this, we were responding to fresh, critical, scholarly thought about Shakespeare's texts, which had been growing over a few years. It suggested that when we had two early versions of a Shakespeare play, one Quarto and one Folio version, the difference between them may be explained, not, as had previously been thought, by the idea that one corrupted the other, or that each of them represented a corrupt version of a lost original, but that one represented the play in a later stage of its evolution than the earlier one.

To give an example, even on quite a small scale, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was first printed in 1600. When it appeared in the First Folio of 1623 there were some changes – not terribly dramatic changes, but they include, for example, redistributions of characters. They include different characters speaking particular speeches. So that is an indication, I think, that when Shakespeare had first

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X14000086 Published online by Cambridge University Press

written the plays they were then put into rehearsal, and in rehearsal, as naturally happens, people had new ideas on how to put them on.

A Midsummer Night's Dream is a comparatively minor case. The most conspicuous examples are *Hamlet*, *Troilus and Cressida*, *Othello*, and *King Lear*. For each of those four plays we have texts which represent the play in different stages of composition. The Oxford *Complete Works* presents the play in its later stage of composition, because we felt that that was likely to be closer to the way it would have been acted. We were concerned to produce an edition which was primarily an edition related to Shakespeare's theatrical achievements and imagination. If we had been editing a bit later, I would have wanted us to print two texts not only of *King Lear*, but also of *Hamlet*, *Troilus and Cressida*, and *Othello*. We were, to some extent, constrained by financial considerations – not wanting to produce too big a book, putting it simply. And things have changed since that volume appeared in 1986. That is one example of the changes that have occurred.

In that same Cambridge Companion*, the final chapters are particularly focused on guiding the reader through the present climate of Shakespeare studies with attention to the new opportunities and challenges presented by globalization and technology. How are Shakespearean scholars coping with new opportunities and challenges today, in your opinion?*

I think we are all on a steep learning curve, as they say! And of course people of my generation do not always find it easy to develop the technical skills required by digitalization. Our children and our grandchildren often find it much easier than we do to cope with computer programmes and the intricacy of it all, but I think that our world is responding well and vigorously to the new opportunities offered by the technical revolution. And at the Birthplace Trust we are certainly making extensive use of computerized techniques in order to spread the word about Shakespeare, to help people to understand and to know what is going on.

This is something which I think means a great deal to young people all over the world studying Shakespeare, who do not have the opportunity, for example, to come to England, to come to Stratford, but who actually have the opportunity to access this information.

Yes. I think that is true. Sometimes I receive rather touching expressions of gratitude – for example from people in Argentina who have recently been taking part in these new forums. A hundred and thirty people signed up for our very recent 'webinar', including people from Hungary, from Estonia, from Argentina. Something that would not have been possible even ten years ago!

From your current critical position have you observed any recent significant changes of direction or new ways of thinking within Shakespeare studies that you would like to comment on?

I have already touched on one major change in recent years, which is the revision theory, the belief that Shakespeare sometimes revised his plays. And the other really significant change in Shakespeare scholarship in the last thirty or more years has been the increasing acknowledgement that he sometimes collaborated with other writers. This was anathema to people thirty or forty years ago – the very idea that some of Shakespeare's plays included material by other writers. The change is partly due to the development of tests of authorship, which have been helped by computerized resources. We are increasingly realizing that Shakespeare was not a lone genius, working on his own, but that in the early part of his career especially, and very understandably, he was writing sometimes in collaboration – with George Peele, with Thomas Nashe, possibly with Christopher Marlowe.

This was a natural enough pattern before he became his own man, as it were, in 1594 with the establishment of the Lord Chamberlain's Men, in which he was both a shareholder and an actor, and the leading member. Then he started being able to write plays without other people being involved. But before then, the earlier plays show signs of collaboration. And towards the end of his

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X14000086 Published online by Cambridge University Press

career, we do not quite know why, he started collaborating again – with George Wilkins on *Pericles*, with Thomas Middleton on *Timon of Athens*, and above all with John Fletcher. The collaboration with Fletcher on *Henry VIII* and *Two Noble Kinsmen* has been recognized for 150 years and more. Perhaps he was getting a bit tired. Perhaps he was acting as a kind of mentor to some of the younger dramatists. I write about this in my *Shakespeare & Co.*, a book which tries to see Shakespeare in relation to the theatrical world of his own time and to other dramatists.

You are also an acclaimed theatre critic and have reviewed countless Shakespearean performances as well as serving as governor of the Royal Shakespeare Theatre and on several committees of various theatres. How would you characterize the relationship between Shakespearean academics and theatre practitioners today?

It is always a rather sensitive relationship, a rather delicate one. Increasingly over the years academics have been involving themselves with theatre. You have only got to look back over the history of Shakespeare editing to see that in more recent times editors have been much more willing, in their notes and introductions, to draw on material about ways in which plays have been acted and produced and directed than editors had been before 1950 or so. So in the academic world there has been a proliferation of books studying the history of plays, books interpreting the plays through performance studies. But the theatre itself, I think, has been too slow to keep up with academic developments – it is not interested. Too often the theatre shows an unawareness of what has been happening in the academic world. In fact, I sometimes get a little depressed if I go to hear and see a play, to realize that they are not making use of the texts that we provide for them, which, at least in some ways, I think, could rejuvenate the productions that they offer us. So I think it is a slightly one-sided affair: the academics now give more to the theatre than the theatre gives to the academics.

So, what do you think we need to do? Do you think we need to do something in order to sustain, develop or improve those relationships today as well as the in the future?

It depends very much on personnel and to that extent it depends on education. It depends on the people who work in the theatre being educated enough to be responsive to areas of influence, to areas of knowledge which go beyond those that relate immediately to their day-to-day experience. In other words, they have got to read! Too many theatrical practitioners, I think, are stuck with the education that they had when they took their degree, and do not go on thinking and learning beyond that. I think a better way forward is for theatre practitioners to be more willing to open themselves up to developments in scholarship, in thought, and they can only do that if they are willing to devote some of their time and energies to extending their knowledge and their reading experience, keeping up with scholarship and thought.

Is there anything academics can do to further the communication and the exchange?

I suppose we can do it by trying to be tolerant. Not always easy, but by writing about the theatre in ways that are intelligible and understandable; in ways that are appealing to the practitioners in the theatre. And also by taking part in public discussions, as some of us do, with theatre people; trying to show that we are receptive to them and that we are not the enemy. There is always a slight feeling in the theatre world, I think, that somehow academics are boring people, who do not have a real concern for theatricality, for theatrical values. and this is a feeling that is difficult to counteract.

You have famously defended the importance of performance to understanding Shakespeare's plays, not least in the often quoted conclusion to the Oxford Complete Works. *Is there any way, in which you, as a scholar, editor, and theatre critic, could define the notion of a Shakespearean play? How should we understand that word: 'play'?*

It is a shifting concept, isn't it? So I think it is one to which we need to respond in shifting ways. We need to be open to changes in

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X14000086 Published online by Cambridge University Press

thought and experience. There is a danger that Shakespeare's intellectuality is undervalued. I have always stood up for the idea that Shakespeare is a great entertainer, for the fact that his plays reach full fruition only in performance, but I have come increasingly to feel that there is a danger that one may underestimate the intelligence that lies behind the plays, both in the way that they are structured and in the language in which they are composed. So it is not enough just to say that we must enjoy the plays in the theatre! I think the plays can only yield their deepest stimuli to those who are willing to read closely and carefully and think seriously about the meanings of what is said.

It is a two-way process: The language is written to be performed and therefore it opens up more in performance perhaps than it does in the reader's mind. At the same time Shakespeare was a thinker. There is a lot of very profound thought in the plays, in some more than in others. But one of the reasons that they are the great plays they are is that they are the result of, essentially, I think, a philosophical mind. A philosophical mind that found its expression, not in philosophical treatises, but in dramatic form. And this is why some of the plays are more difficult than others; more difficult conceptually as well as linguistically.

A play like *Troilus and Cressida*, for example, is not one of the more popular plays partly because it is such a difficult play, in which Shakespeare is grappling at a fundamental level with questions about what it means to be a human being. That is also why, to my my mind, the greatest of all plays is *King Lear*, because that is the one in which he is thinking and projecting, in dramatic form, most seriously, and most intensely his thoughts about what it means to be human, about what it means to be born, and to know that you're going to die, and to see other people dying. This plays a deeply philosophical role to him.

But is he philosophical in a systematic way?

It is asking questions rather than providing answers. But the very fact that he thinks the importance lies in asking questions served, I think, as some sort of philosophical basis. It is always probing. It is never closing down. It is always opening up one's mind, and the minds of his characters in his plays, to experience and to formulate linguistic responses to experience, too. It is what the poet has to do. Of course, he is a poet as well as a playwright. Perhaps we should remember that a little more – that his genius found expression, sometimes at least, in non-dramatic writing, though far less so than with many of his contemporaries.

Might one see these constant questions being asked – philosophical questions – as perhaps a useful link between readers and audiences, between reading and performance? Because the questions are often addressed to the audience, are they not?

Yes. Take what is, to me, one of the most moving lines in *King Lear*, when Lear says: 'Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life, and thou no breath at all?' He is speaking that over the body of Cordelia, his dead daughter. But the question is one which could be addressed equally to members of the audience: why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life, and you, you in the audience, when you are dead, no breath at all? What lies behind the sufferings that we endure? What is the purpose of life?

Is there any particular advice you would give to an aspiring Shakespearean scholar today?

I think I would only say: Read! Think! Read openly! Try to connect the plays with your own experience, with the experience of other people.

That is interesting also in relation to some of the changes we have seen quite recently within Shakespeare studies, with some critics re-introducing the kind of subjective criticism which has not necessarily been popular over recent decades, but seems to be coming back now. Do you have any comments on that development?

You are quite right. There is a developing movement in Shakespearean criticism which stresses subjectivity, which encourages people to write about the plays in relation to their own experience rather than trying to objectify them or to speak as if they were,

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X14000086 Published online by Cambridge University Press

somehow, writing from the top of a mountain. It is looking at the plays and the works as opportunities for self-exploration, isn't it? As if the plays were works which offer great stimulus to look inside ourselves, and think about ourselves, and from that, I suppose, to turn outwards again, revivified, refreshed by what we have taken into us, and, perhaps, applying that in our own lives.

So it is not simply on a subjective level, but turning outwards again and communicating with others. This leads to my final question: is there any advice that you would give to anyone today approaching Shakespeare, as readers, as theatregoers, as human beings?

I suppose ultimately one has to say that the important thing is humility. The important thing is to subject oneself, to try to take it all in, to open oneself up to the experience, the richness of the experience that the plays, the works, can offer, just as one can open oneself up to any great art, the great art of Michelangelo, of Beethoven, of Mozart. The great artists are those who teach us to respond more widely, more vibrantly, more intelligently, more sensitively to the world, and thus to the people around us, which is why I think great art has enormous humanitarian value. It humanizes us and helps to keep us responsive to the things in life that really matter: human relationships.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X14000086 Published online by Cambridge University Press