Shakespeare’s Possible Worlds

New methods are needed to do justice to Shakespeare. His work exceeds conventional models, past and present, for understanding playworlds. In this book, Simon Palfrey goes right to the heart of early modern popular drama, revealing both how it works and why it matters. Unlike his contemporaries, Shakespeare gives independent life to all his instruments, and to every fraction and fragment of the plays. Palfrey terms these particles “formactions” – theatre-specific forms that move with their own action and passion. Palfrey’s book is critically daring in both substance and format. Its unique mix of imaginative gusto, thought-experiments, and virtuosic technique generates piercing close readings of the plays. There is far more to playlife than meets the eye. Influenced by Leibniz’s visionary original model of possible worlds, Palfrey opens up the multiple worlds of Shakespeare’s language, scenes, and characters as never before.

SIMON PALFREY is Professor of English Literature at the University of Oxford. He is the joint founding editor of Shakespeare Now! His books include Late Shakespeare: A New World of Words (1997), Doing Shakespeare (2004, 2011 – named a TLS International Book of the Year), Shakespeare in Parts (with Tiffany Stern, 2007 – winner of an AHRC Innovations Award and the MRDS David Bevington Award for best new book on Medieval and Renaissance drama), and Poor Tom: Living “King Lear” (2014).
Shakespeare’s Possible Worlds

Simon Palfrey
For Jo
Contents

Acknowledgements ix
A note on texts xii

Part I Entering Playworlds 1
1 Where is the life? 3
2 Purposes 10
3 Embryologies 21
4 Shakespeare the impossible 33
5 Popular theatre and possibility 43
6 Shakespeare v. actor 56
7 Playing to the plot 67
8 Middleton 77
9 Jacobean comi-tragedy 88
10 Everyman tyrant 98

Part II Modelling Playworlds 107
11 The monadic playworld 109
12 Formactions 123
13 The truth of anachronism 147
14 Possible history: Henry IV 160
15 Anti-rhetoric 177
viii   Contents
16   Falstaff                        183
17   Scenes within scenes           187
18   Strange mimesis                199
19   How close should we get?       206
20   Metaphysics and playworlds      213
21   Pyramids of possible worlds    228

Part III  Suffering Playworlds      243
22   Perdita’s possible lives       245
23   A life in scenes               275
24   Scene as joke: Much Ado        282
25   Buried lives: Macbeth          286
26   The rape of Marina             297
27   Life at the end of the line: Macbeth  316
28   Dying for life: Desdemona      330

Epilogue: life on the line          360
Bibliography                        364
Index                                375
Acknowledgements

This is a book about Shakespearean possibility. Inevitably, I barely scratch the surface of my subject. But there is another smaller reason why I see my book as incomplete. Throughout much of its making, as it was dreamt and researched and drafted and redrafted, I was working towards one particular culminating example: Edgar-Tom in *King Lear*. But the material on Tom and Edgar started to build and build, and eventually threatened to overwhelm the enterprise, and so I decided to omit it completely and make it the subject of a separate work. This has become *Poor Tom: Living “King Lear”*, published by the University of Chicago Press in 2014, an intensification and extension of my approach in *Shakespeare’s Possible Worlds*. I hope that anyone stimulated by either one of these books may also find things to enjoy in its partner.

In many ways my most important interlocutors have been my students at Brasenose College, Oxford. It was in tutorials and classes with them (and lectures to the wider student body) that I had the chance to test my ideas and find compelling examples; and of course they contributed many of their own. And so I want to thank them all, particularly those of the last three years: Harry Ford, Rob Williams, Alice Gimblett, Georgia Mallin, Richard O’Brien, Katie Carpenter, Jessica Edwards, Celia Berton, Emily Hawes, Brogan Kear, Lucy Fyffe, Saranna Blair, Duncan Morrison, Dani Pearson, Savannah Whaley, Chloe Wicks, Chloe Cornish, Emily Hislop, Amy Lewin, Amy Rollason, Trisha Sircar, Pari Thomson, Christopher Webb, James Fennemore, Maria Fleischer, Josie Mitchell, Joshua Phillips, Namratha Rao, Rachel Rowan-Olive, and Alexandra Sutton.

I owe enormous thanks to Joanna Picciotto. A year or so ago I showed her what I took to be the more-or-less finished manuscript. She gave it a fierce and passionate reading, enthusiastic and exacting, and I realised...
x  Acknowledgements

how very far I actually was from doing justice to the subject. Subsequent edits and additions have, I hope, brought me just a little closer. Ewan Fernie has read very little of this, but he abides as a soul partner, our efforts always a kind of mutually galvanised tilting at possibilities. Vimala Pasupathi has throughout offered close and trusted counsel. Much of this book builds upon work done in the past with Tiffany Stern. An Oxford MA course we designed and taught together helped me to refine some nascent ideas and dismiss some others; our work remains at once radically different and surprisingly coordinate. And I am indebted to many others across the world who have helped with ideas, encouragement, and criticism. There are too many to recount, but among them are Sylvia Adamson, Jacquelyn Bessell, Graham Bradshaw, Ben Burton, Dermot Cavanagh, Philip Davis, Margreta de Grazia, Elisabeth Dutton, Sos Eltis, Larry Friedlander, John Gillies, Andreas Hoefele, Peter Holbrook, Laurie Johnson, Farah Karim-Cooper, Philippa Kelly, Theresa Krier, Aaron Kunin, Erika Lin, Ruby Lowe, Julia Lupton, Raphael Lyne, Laurie Maguire, Steve Mentz, Paul Menzer, Edward Muir, Eve-Marie Oesterlen, David Parker, Mireille Ravassat, Yasmine Richardson, Kiernan Ryan, David Schalkwyk, Regina Schwartz, Elizabeth Scott-Baumann, John Sutton, Margaret Tudeau-Clayton, Henry Turner, William West, Ramona Wray, Bob White, Michael Witmore, and Paul Yachnin. And then there is Sarah Stanton at Cambridge University Press. She must get tired of authors saluting her professionalism, so I will instead praise her dauntlessness. Two anonymous readers for Cambridge University Press produced very engaged, very insightful reports, which I have benefited from hugely in revising. Kate Boothby has been an acute proofreader, and Fleur Jones has helped see the book very efficiently through production. And I must thank Istvan Orosz (Hungary’s successor to Escher) for allowing me to use his poster for the book’s cover image, and for requesting only a couple of copies of the book in return!

I am lucky to have been invited to speak at a number of venues where I have tested out bits of the work-in-progress: these include the University of Edinburgh; the Shakespeare Institute, Birmingham; the University of Cambridge; the School of Oriental and African Studies and Royal Holloway, University of London; Lancaster University; Queen’s University Belfast; Chinese University of Hong Kong; the
Acknowledgements

University of Melbourne; the University of Queensland; the University of Oxford; Rutgers University; and University of California, Berkeley. I have also tried out parts of it at Shakespeare Association of America meetings in Chicago, Bellevue, and Toronto, the World Shakespeare Congress in Prague, the German Shakespeare Society in Zurich (disastrously . . .), the European Society for the Study of English (ESSE) in Turin, the Modern Languages Association in Seattle, and the International Shakespeare Conference in Stratford-upon-Avon. I am grateful to the various organisers, and to the many thoughtful (and sometimes sceptical) respondents, far too many to list by name.

Small portions of the material have appeared elsewhere, either earlier versions when the work was in process, or more recently as tasters for the forthcoming book: some of chapter 27 in “Macbeth and Kierkegaard”, *Shakespeare Survey* 57, edited by Peter Holland (Cambridge University Press, 2004); some of chapter 26 in “The Rape of Marina”, *Shakespeare International Yearbook*, edited by Graham Bradshaw and Tom Bishop (Ashgate, 2009); some of the Middleton material in “Middleton’s Presence”, *Middleton in Context*, edited by Suzanne Gossett (Cambridge University Press, 2012); some of chapter 7 in “Formaction”, *Early Modern Theatricality*, edited by Henry Turner (Oxford University Press, 2013); some of chapter 20 in “Strange Mimesis”, edited by Paul Menzer and Jeremy Lopez, *The Hare* (Online Journal, 2013). I am grateful to all of them for supporting the work (and where necessary for permission to reproduce it).

This book is dedicated to Jo. She avoids reading anything I write, a forbearance which I happily construe as faith, sanity, and permission. And which daily reminds me there are worlds elsewhere.
A note on texts