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Simon Palfrey
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Part I

Entering Playworlds

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1 Where is the life?

This book begins with a simple question: where is the life in Shakespeare's playworlds? What produces it, or counts as it? How small, or brief, can playlife be? How many lives make a world, or worlds a life? These are questions about possibility or potentiality, as much as they are about any palpable, self-consciously articulated actuality. And they are questions that pertain as much to me, the reader or witness of the play-event, as they do to the life or the worlds in motion. What is at stake in my recognitions? Are habitual ways of naming or admitting possibility adequate to the life in playworlds? (Are they adequate to life?) And what if playlife is far more manifoldly *possible* – has more materials, instruments, locations, layers – than is often presupposed in our frequently theme-driven, commonsensical, or sentimental responses to plays? Playlife need not correspond to an actor's visible body, or to a named character. There are points of life everywhere. Not organic life, as we usually understand the term; not machinic life either: playlife. To feel out its variations, we mustn't rush to regularise or naturalise a playworld's moment-by-moment phenomena, as though all that we witness has to be self-evidently familiar. Instead, we need to take seriously the strange factitiousness of playlife: its synthetic morphology; its intermitted dispersal or disappearance; its assemblage or disassemblage in this or that formal unit; its distribution into ostensible unities which have to be gathered or inferred from quantum assertions of presence. What can it mean to allow such a confection as a measure of human possibility? Our basic understanding of the play-event might have to change – of our complicity in it, our strangeness or intimacy to it. And with this, our understanding of how plays render what it is to be an existing thing.

How then to touch the life in plays?

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A good start is attending to particulars. The play may be a feast for the eyes, with display abundant, skills and charisma, the centre-stage demand to watch the juggler juggling. But the balls will fall, and should be followed as they roll slowly into corners. The ears may likewise suffer assault. Drums and music, words, words, words, intoned at speed and impossibly self-certain. Allow the noise, let it sweep us somewhere new. But again: stay to listen once the spit and bluster passes. There will be much that belies self-announcement. And so let's imagine, beyond the clamour, or inside its appeal, that these worlds are also designed for – are designs *of* – the most delicate hypersensitivity. Anything might flinch at a touch, or describe its own tiny ellipses. There are centres of feeling at every turn, so be careful as we tread. Let's step out of shared visible continuities, out of evident plot or articulated purpose, and move in less imperative, less brightly lit passages. Or step more deeply inside, collapsing distances, allowing discomforting intimacies. Inside the fidget, an itch that is rarely reached. There is no detail unworthy of our attention.

Let us split and magnify, zoom in and zoom out, look intently at the surfaces, discover action where before was emptiness, movement where things seemed still. Imagine that we have never seen these things before (perhaps we haven't). How else to feel what the possibilities are? Allow them to be new, or strange, or changed. Cast off our daily bodies, the neutralising banality of all of these senses, cancelling each other out, sensing only what we expect to sense. Instead, slow things down, and stretch the spaces in-between matter. Or blow things up – perhaps inflate them so that the air around them breeds; perhaps detonate them, such that we witness the shrapnel they render. Imagine surrendering to entirely different agents of knowledge: say the pressure of fingers, such that we *feel* a world, and only touch can confer reality; or the most refined touch of all, a world rendered in sound, in which silence is impossible, and the quietest gap, however unspeaking or unheard, is never noiseless. Or find the human by imagining the animal: ear of dog, nose of bear, eye of rat. Imagine yourself a deer, alive to the fact that hearing is vibration, a curtain upon the very possibility of continuing life. Enter the life in anything, however beyond the human, or the pale, or even the visible horizon. After all, this is what Shakespeare does all the time.

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Some lines will be so famous as to be difficult to process. But the worlds they make can be alarmingly strange:

> When shall we three meet againe?
> In Thunder, Lightning, or in Raine? (*Macbeth*, 1. 1. 1–2)

It is tempting to take the three elements as one, assuming that they are, as Frank Kermode has said, "in the same hedgerow; they do not differ so completely as to be presentable as mutually exclusive alternatives".[1] But these are the play's first words: we might say the *Macbeth*-world's founding words. Shakespeare is doing much more than setting up false equivocations and parodies of choice (although he is doing this too). In a minute or two we hear of "Cannons over-charged with double-Crackes" (58): this is the kind of world we have entered, where noises crackle and split, where rounded things, like a cloud or a cannon, are at once monstrously self-exceeding and shivered into angles, in which each splintering crack is intensely centred, purposive, a motive unto itself, while also marking a breach out of which who knows what life may tumble. It is a world, remember, in which *the earth hath bubbles*! We can only conceive of such a thing by imagining prodigies unknown to daylight (TLN 180).

The opening couplet discharges into just such an environment. Its principles are in a sense simple enough. The enduring condition is storm. But the storm is not a single blanketing fury, any more than earth is merely solid, air merely gas, or time a rolling continuum (thunder here precedes lightning). We should not instantly reblend what the script so clearly separates. *In Thunder – in Lightning – in Rain*: each can be entered, one at a time. Each place is simultaneous, *and* it is separated; each moment too. This world is weirdly quantumised, as though happening in discrete sheets of place or event: a sheet of thunder; a plate of lightning; a bubble of rain. The constituents are spaced apart, as though before the daily joining. The elements really are elements, the substances that constitute a world, reduced to their simplicity for these three alone. How else to slip into one and then the other, be wrapped inside its secrets, unless creation has marvellously resolved into its rudiments? Only

[1] *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 83.

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the diabolic hand, perhaps, can feel such changes, turn sound into place, open the lightning, enter the raindrop. Only the diabolic eye, perhaps, can so distinguish such parts, each one an epitome of possibility, when the eye of day sees only chaos or conflation. This sort of touch and sight is the witches': but it is also Shakespeare's. The world is indeed blown up.

Shakespeare's possible worlds have little or nothing to do with utopias, dreamscapes, fantastical visions of paradise. They have everything to do with travel across space and time – but the travelling does not require displacement to the moon or Atlantis or the Americas. Of course, Shakespeare's heterocosmic imagination plays its part in larger stories of travel, adventure, and speculation (philosophical, scientific, colonial, economic); in all kinds of ways his work is symptomatic of an age in which worlds and perspectives were multiplying. I take this larger story as a given: one which Shakespeare's play-forms contribute to, perhaps rival, perhaps explosively concentrate – and perhaps at times exceed. For Shakespeare's creation is often at odds with customary ideas of lives and worlds, which presume extension in time and space (*her* life, *that* world), a communally agreed physical presence (the life can be seen, the place can be entered), and a public name to accord with this essentially single entity (Juliet, Verona).[2] There is more to life than this. Think of how impoverished our sense of life must be, if we understood it only as human life, and then only as that element of human life that could be seen, now, like serried commuters at a bus stop, and which could be downloaded in present time to a spectator who instantly understood everything. What would such a world be like? No memory, no confusion, no competing planes, nothing unfinishable; no birdsong, no moss, no germs or bones or smells. Just these more or less finished exemplars, telling us what they are for. The dead plays do pretty much this, the ones that only scholars bother with, for completeness' sake.

2 For a comprehensive study of early modern "worldmaking" in the more usual sense of the term, see Mary Baine Campbell, *Wonder and Science: Imagining Worlds in Early Modern Europe* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1999): "In my use of the word 'world' I will not . . . imply that for every proposition or axiom or even semantic pattern there is an implied world for which it is true. For my category of 'worlds' I would like to retain as an attribute the social concept of the habitable or inhabitable." But Campbell allows this to include the worlds of a particular novel: "the unspecified habitability of the 'innumerable worlds' of Giordano Bruno's controversial speculations, and the extension and non-human sentience with which the microscopic 'world' is represented in the first decades of its accessibility", 10.

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But not the living ones, the ones that remain possible, because they are alive, like any ecology is, with potentiality.

Touching such possibilities isn't only about being super-subtle hermeneuts. We need to combine delicate attendance – probing gaps, attending to silences – with openness, in ourselves, to passion. We have to banish pre-emptive sentimentalism, which will always tend to serve established shapes and templates. Instead we must be open to *anything* bearing life. This will certainly not be limited to the actor-character's body. Here we need to recover more forcibly the early modern age's predilection for allegory, for all kinds of micro-thinking, and for a dynamic understanding of nature which potentially saw personified emotions or nano-machines everywhere. It is hardly a stretch to give any formal instrument its own *conatus*, or soul-appetite, both in its generic purpose and at each instantiation: so, scenes are animate with desire, a cue is hungry for connection, metalepses house competing endeavours. Perhaps we simply miss existing lives because we are not expecting to find them, or to find them in such form.

This proposes something very different from a conventional understanding of playlife, in which our experience hinges upon the sympathetic recognition of named, visible characters. We might fear them or for them, laugh at them or with them, but the basic contract is assumed to be with actor-sized figures, more or less shaped and moved like us. Obviously, such identifications are indispensable to a play's success. But if playlife is composed and distributed in the cellular or molecular way I am suggesting, then this must substantially modify how we understand the lives at issue. It suggests that we have an insufficient grasp, far too approximate, of the sources of our affects, which will not be so readily attributed to a self-surveying, self-articulating, cognitively centred character; it suggests that we are far too ready to normalise what we witness, leap from a play's synthetic concatenations to as-though complete, coherent lives; it suggests we need to open up our sense of a playworld's possible life forms, and of the kinds of activity that may bear, produce, or secrete passion and action.[3]

[3] Compare Bert O. States: "plays, in their fashion, are efficient machines whose parts are characters who are made of actors. All characters in a play are nested together in 'dynamical communion', or in what we might call a reciprocating balance of nature: every character

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The path to possible life, then, is a combination of patient, scrupulous, repeated attendance; resistance to those presumptive expectations which, from timidity or conformity or complacency, consign certain matter to non-being; and strategically naive affect, a mode of negative capability, feeling each possibility as though a new-born aspirant for actuality. It means entering spaces which are not presented front-on, and which in the presentation are finished with. Playlife may be attenuated, or interrupted, or prevented, or waiting, or alone. It may exist anachronically, moving simultaneously between spatio-temporal planes, be subvisible as much as visible, virtual as much as concrete. It may move *between* palpable things, like lines, speeches, referents, or an actor and his character. Often it will seem to be contingent upon recognition, and yet strangely not press its presence into our consciousness. Playlife may be at once exploded and unexploded. The challenge to our experience is potentially huge. Where is the life? Have you recognised it? What can it mean if you haven't?

What Elaine Scarry says of flowers, we might equally say of playlife, and of the fineness and rarity of its materials:

> Pre-image and after-image, subsentient and supersentient, the plant exposes the shape of a mental process that combines the almost percipient with a kind of transitory exactness. It is as though the very precision required to find the exquisitely poised actuality of the flower's "vague sentience" manifests itself as a form of acuity.[4]

Similarly pertinent is what Timothy Morton calls the "ecological thought":

> It is a vast, sprawling mesh of interconnection without a definite center or edge. It is radical intimacy, coexistence with other beings, sentient and otherwise – and how can we so clearly tell the difference?[5]

'contains in itself' the *cause* of actions, or determinations, in other characters and the effects of their causality. (Dialogue, by this token, is a continuous oscillation of cause and effect: each line is the *effect* of the preceding line and the *cause* of the line to follow.)" *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms: On the Phenomenology of Theater* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 146–7.

[4] *Dreaming by the Book* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 68.

[5] Morton continues: "The ecological thought fans out into questions concerning cyborgs, artificial intelligence, and the irreducible uncertainty over what counts as a person . . . the ethics of the ecological thought is to regard beings as people even when they aren't people." And later: "There's something slightly sizeist about viewing life as squishy, palpable substances, as if all life forms shared our kinds of tissue. This prejudice breaks down at high resolutions. Viruses

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This last is the really necessary question. What actually counts as sentience, or sub- or super-sentience, in a playworld? To whom or what does it belong? What exactly generates or houses it? The witness, certainly, as phenomenology demands: but not only that. We might again borrow from biology – perhaps the unit of selection is the gene, or the group, or the ecosystem, or some intra- or supra-subjective organism, as much as any discrete unified individual subject. The existing need not be human-sized, or even human; it may be something fugitive, alive only beneath layers, or as unevenly identified potentiality. We may get percipience without accompanying recognition – in Hegelian terms, a kind of incipient or disregarded subject or event, awaiting the founding mirror. This links to the question of the incompossible, the prevented life, or what the ancients often termed *privation*. If playlife can only be rescued belatedly, after the event; if it can only be glimpsed, snatched or guessed at, or dimly apprehended as the carnival passes by; if only one in a hundred, or in a hundred thousand, feels its occluded potentiality: then what kind of existing is this? If the playlife is fathoms deep, locatable only via rare interpretive whimsy, or stolen affect, or overcurious morbidity – then is it truly possible? Who can say it is not?

are large crystals . . . At the base of the daffodil, where it joins the stem, you see traces of how the flower looked when it started to spread upward and outward. You're looking at a daffodil's past, as well as at the past development of the flower as a species . . . Material organization turns out to be sets of formal relationships, not squishy stuff." *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 8, 67–8.

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2 Purposes

To recover Shakespeare's particularity depends above all upon technically informed imagination. This is crucial for anyone seeking to bring these playworlds alive (student, actor, historian, director, teacher, composer). Without imagination – the willingness to construct things from virtually nothing, to enter into the minds or bodies of never-known others, to sympathise with actions or appetites that we may abhor, or that leave us cold, to feel out the fullness in apparent emptiness, to find adjacencies or connections where the daily mind sees only separation – we risk being no more than number crunchers. But I stress: imagination is of little use without technique; and, more than that, without moment-by-moment alertness to specifically theatrical technique. Everything else follows in its wake. Without such imagination the play is nothing; without it I don't write a word.

This is hardly a novel claim. In fact in many ways it is scrupulously historical. Shakespeare's period was one of burgeoning self-reflectiveness about method and technique, and about the surest path to knowledge of the world and communication of such knowledge. And whatever the art (oratory, geometry, war, playmaking . . .), imagination and improvisation were repeatedly invoked as essential for good invention.[1] Today's scholarship often runs shy of anything so potentially groundless, rather as it does the modal range, dialogical liberties, and disciplinary compounds of so much Renaissance discourse. One aim of my book is to recover something of this, at least as a permission to think leapingly as well as metonymically, and to adventure out of over-trodden comfort zones.

[1] Henry S. Turner, *The English Renaissance Stage: Geometry, Poetics, and the Practical Spatial Arts 1580–1630* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

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Consequently, as well as conventional academic critique, the book features occasional polemical episodes, a few creative apostrophes and thought-experiments, and a number of sustained experiments in super-close reading. I don't think there is much point in reading Shakespeare in any way other than super-closely; not if we want to discover things we don't think we know. For my purposes there is no use in staying at a polite distance, content with approximation. But inevitably this kind of attention comes at a price. It means that the readings have to be *close*; it means that I linger and labour over details. My findings may at times feel obscure, or simply too ingenious, particularly to the more casual eye. But if I seem to some readers to find too much, so be it. It's a price I am content to pay. I tend to think that there is far more to see and to say than I can ever imagine. But without at least some agreement to imagine possibilities that may not always seem self-evident, and to imagine them closely – at the level of Shakespeare's most delicate forms, and sometimes at the level of my own sentences as I try to probe these forms – no reader will much enjoy this book. It is by no means a remorseless punishment. A lot of the book, I think, is easy and straightforward enough. But some of it has considerable density or concentration (in line with its subject), which I hope repays attention.

My approach to Shakespeare is distinguished by a few intertwining purposes. First, in my abiding interest in how words work, both as instruments in the theatre and as embodiers of meaning. This means that I do not use the playtext as an occasion for exploring other discourses: it is the fundamental occasion. Second, in bringing the same intense close reading to bear on *all* the materials and instruments of theatre, textual and extra-textual: I see every moving unit as a potential mode or node of language.

Shakespeare's habit of concentrating possibilities into single moments has long been recognised. Here is Hypollite Taine: "Behind the word is a whole picture, a long train of reasoning foreshortened, a swarm of ideas. . .These various forms of speech do more than denote ideas, they all suggest images. Every one of them is the concentration of a complete mimic action";[2] and here Peter Brook: "Shakespeare, alone in all playwriting,

[2] Hypollite Taine, *Romeo and Juliet Variorum*, ed., Horace Howard Furness (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1874), 441–2.

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