udc 929:821.111 Stanivuković G.

INTERVIEW: GORAN STANIVUKOVIĆ

‘NEVER ASSUME ANYTHING’

by Jelisaveta Milojević

PROFESSOR GORAN STANIVUKOVIĆ earned his degrees in English Language and Literature, receiving a B.A. from the University of Novi Sad (Faculty of Philosophy) in 1985 and an M.A. and Ph.D. from the University of Belgrade (Faculty of Philology) in 1987 and 1991, respectively. He specialized in the literature of the English Renaissance and Shakespeare. He was an assistant lecturer in English Literature at the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Novi Sad and a part-time assistant in English Literature at the Faculty of Philology of the University of Belgrade. Currently he is a Full Professor of English Renaissance Literature at Saint Mary’s University, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada. He served as the head of the English Literature Department at Saint Mary’s University twice. He was also a faculty member at the University of Sheffield (United Kingdom) and Cape

Breton (Canada). He has been a guest lecturer at academic institutions in Canada, USA, Great Britain, Ireland, Germany, Austria, the Czech Republic, Malta, Australia, Spain, France, Croatia, and Serbia. He has published 24 academic papers and 27 chapters in books. He writes for *The Times Literary Supplement*. The books that he has authored and edited are: *Knights in Arms: Masculinity, Prose Romance, and Fictions of Eastern Mediterranean Trade in Early Modern England, 1565-1655* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015); *Remapping the Mediterranean World in Early Modern English Writings*, ed. (New York and London: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2007); *Prose Fiction and Early Modern Sexualities in England, 1570-1640,* ed. and Constance C. Relihan (New York and London: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2003); Emanuel Ford, *The Most Pleasant History of Ornatus and Artesia*, ed. and commentary (Ottawa: Dovehouse, 2003); *Ovid and the Renaissance Body*, ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001); *Kratki ep u engleskoj renesansnoj književnosti*. (Novi Sad: Institut za strane jezike i književnosti, 1988). He was awarded twice for his academic achievements: The Calvin and Rose G. Hoffman Prize for a Distinguished Publication on Christopher Marlowe (2008), the King's School, Canterbury, Great Britain, and annual award for overall academic achievement presented by the Chancellor of Saint Mary's University (2009). He has received research scholarships from: the Marie Curie International Research Fellowship (European Research Council), University College at Cork, Ireland (2011-2013); the Andrew W. Mellon – Huntington Library (San Marino, California); the Folger Shakespeare Library (Washington, DC); the Newberry Library (Chicago); the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas Austin (Texas); the Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, University of California (Los Angeles). Professor Stanivuković is currently working on the following books: *Shakespeare's Early Styles* (Cambridge University Press); *Shakespeare and Early English Prose Fiction* (McGill-Queen's University Press); *Romance Writing in English Literature,* ed. (Montreal and London: McGill-Queen's University Press: publication due September 2015).

BELLS: It has been twenty five years since we met at the University of Belgrade, where I was then an assistant lecturer in English. We shared the same academic background (Novi Sad, Belgrade, Birmingham). At the time, I was a happy beneficiary of your kindness and expertise—as I am again today, thanks to your

unfailing generosity with both your time and willingness to speak with us

GORAN STANIVUKOVIĆ: I am honoured by sharing these pages with you.

BELLS: I think I may not be wrong in saying that from the very beginning of your career you enjoyed the support and admiration of esteemed colleagues – however, you decided to follow your academic pursuits elsewhere, in search of a new and more stimulating research environment. What were the academic challenges and reasons behind your decision to leave Novi Sad and Belgrade, and later, Sheffield and Cape Breton?

GORAN STANIVUKOVIĆ: I wish I could say that each of the academic moves that I have made in my career had been initiated and motivated solely by my decision to seek more stimulating research environment. In most, though not all, instances that has indeed been the case. However, the most important and most difficult move, from my native country to Britain first, then to Canada, was initiated by external circumstances. As one of the generation of the 1990s, I left Novi Sad and Belgrade because I did not think I could work surrounded with pressure in the militarized environment in the country at that time. When I found myself in Britain, living in Stratford-upon-Avon and continuing to study daily at The Shakespeare Institute of the University of Birmingham, I found myself in the middle of a deepening financial depression that had engulfed Britain in the early 1990s and that seemed to have affected the public education sector particularly hard; there were hardly any academic jobs to apply for. I was in competition with a large cohort of accomplished applicants running for what looked like morsels of academic jobs. It was only later, when I moved to Canada, that I realized the extent to which the long hours of staying up to work in the library of the Shakespeare Institute and participate in the activities organized there helped me build the foundation of knowledge upon which I still draw many years later. I arrived to Canada after a six-month stint on a German post-doctoral grant at the University of Cologne, where I taught a course on Shakespeare and the rhetoric of power to a large group of keen students, and worked on an article for publication. Very soon upon my arrival, I was really lucky to land a full-time position at Cape Breton University. Teaching Renaissance poetry and drama in a small liberal arts university located on the shores of the Atlantic; in one allegedly of North America's most spectacular maritime settings; and in small classes became an ideal academic base in which to hone my teaching skills, develop new courses, and prepare publications. Yet the pull of a much larger research-intensive university in an equally appealing urban setting, outweighed the charm and even advantages of living and working in Cape Breton (a place where Gaelic is still spoken). The city of Halifax, where I moved after teaching in Cape Breton, opened many new academic doors, with its excellent academic libraries, a special collection of books printed in the early modern period, and the provincial archive that stores a wealth of printed material and manuscripts from the early modern period. At one point in my academic life in Halifax, an opportunity arose for me to return to Britain, which I did. I spent five stimulating semesters of teaching and convening a course on Shakespeare and Renaissance Drama in a very large School of English at the University of Sheffield. That School of English was once the academic home to two great British scholars and critics of Shakespeare, William Empson and Geoffrey Bullough, and to Roma Gill, still unsurpassed editor of Christopher Marlowe. But I returned to Saint Mary's University at the point when I thought that I would have more opportunity and, most importantly, time to develop my scholarship in an unimpeded way. In the Anglo-American academic environment moves from one job to another, or from one research opportunity to another, are increasingly seen, not as signs of one's academic restlessness but as confirmation of one's merit; and as actions that benefit not just an individual and an institution, but the profession in general. That is, each move normally brings a new set of resources and new conditions that enable scholarly development. It is for that reason, too, that I also spent two academic years, 2011-2013, as a senior Marie Curie international research fellow at University College Cork, in Ireland, where I was funded by the European Research Council. My home university in Canada was happy to grant me a two-year leave of absence to take on this prestigious international fellowship because the university gained something from the symbolical value attached to the fellowship. The greatest challenge in each of these moves was to carve a niche for one's own academic (and human) personality in an environment full of new, ambitious, and competitive people. Luckily, literature is a terrific social, not just professional, glue, and I have found ways of being part of different conversations about literature that in new departmental environments opened both social and professional doors. Of course, there has been a myriad of small challenges related to the intricacies and idiosyncrasies of daily working life that I have had to master over the years.

BELLS: What is the connection between your Belgrade academic background and your current academic work?

GORAN STANIVUKOVIĆ: Soon it will be ten years since I have started returning to the Faculty of Philology in Belgrade regularly to give guest lectures, courtesy of the departments of English and general literature and literary theory. (After many years, I was happy to be able to give lectures in my native Novi Sad last year.) Those occasions are important for me both personally and professionally. Not only do I have the opportunity to re-connect with the colleagues whom I have known since the start of my career. But I am also aware of the fact that the questions and academic debate that ensue after my lectures will be both constructive and inspiring, making me think in new directions. I acknowledge this encouragement in my publications and reflect it in my writing. Late last autumn, for example, I gave a lecture at the Faculty of Philology on Shakespeare's sonnets and the portrait miniature painting in England in the 1590s. After I had finished, a student sitting in the back row asked me to consider a different direction in my argument, one that would include Italian humanist writing on imitation, not the visual material in England, as I proposed, as a connection with the sonnets. Those are moments worth returning to the Belgrade academic environment because that level of engagement and sharp speculation coming from undergraduate students is maybe only possible in places like the Faculty of Philology, where key books are read systematically and where a deep immersion in all aspects of the discipline of literature is cultivated. My students in Canada, quick witted and clever though they are, study in a system where they pick and mix courses over the course of their four-year undergraduate degree, and that produces different results. Postgraduate education is a different matter. Most importantly, however, some of the fundamental directions of my research to date—my interest in language as a medium of literary communication, rhetoric as the crucial shaping force of dramatic poetry, the interplay between poetry and drama in Shakespeare and his contemporaries, and Shakespeare and the Mediterranean—were all established in Belgrade, when I was an MA and PhD student of Professor Veselin Kostić, and in Novi Sad, my *alma mater*, where I studied English language and literature. I have published an essay in *BELLS* recently and have extended, or expanded, the scope of my continuing link with Belgrade in that way as well.

BELLS: You have lectured in twelve countries across the globe. What are current trends in Shakespeare studies around the world?

GORAN STANIVUKOVIĆ: The word 'trend' in your question is the right word to capture what goes on in Shakespeare scholarship at the moment, and generally all the time. I do not think that any other writer in Western literary heritage either suffers from or is met with such a fast succession of critical trends as Shakespeare. Nor is there any other writer whose work has yielded itself to such a variety of creative media across culture. From academic monographs to opera, and from graphic novels to pop music and ballet, Shakespeare is everywhere where human desire for creativity, expression, and the creation of knowledge appears. At the moment, there are two major trends that I would isolate as those that dominate scholarly debates and conversations in Shakespeare criticism. One is a return to bibliography, textual studies, and what I would call the material milieu of Shakespeare's career and its afterlives. I have in mind the continuous and seemingly unstoppable need to produce more new critical editions of Shakespeare's works. This current of Shakespeare scholarship has been driven partly by the market for university textbooks, since Shakespeare is still one of the required courses in most universities in Britain, Ireland, and North America. (I am only referring to academic cultures in which I have had personal experience of working.) However, partly, this trend has also been driven by an almost unwritten imperative among scholars to attempt improving the editorial apparatus and commentary in existing editions because there is still perception that scholarly prestige rests in editing Shakespeare, or in resolving technical, textual and editorial, problems. Under the umbrella of this trend I would also include growing scholarship on Shakespeare's collaboration and the conditions in which he worked. Paradoxical though this may sound, but judging by the number of articles and books arguing for more and more plays to have been written collaboratively between Shakespeare and one of his contemporaries, it seems that Shakespeare scholarship is working towards shaking up and shattering the foundations of the very Shakespearean canon upon which its own identity as a field of study depends for its authority and scholarly prestige. Trouble is, however, that most of these arguments are neither new nor do they actually create a paradigm shift. There are still far more plays of different quality in the Shakespeare canon for which Shakespeare authorship as a solo writer is not under scrutiny. This tendency to demystify the singularity and preeminence of Shakespeare as a dramatist and a subject of scholarly attention is welcome, even if its implication is not to particularly encourage criticism on non-Shakespearean drama, terrific drama, one hastens to add, that remains relatively untouched by drama critics. However, despite these new interventions into editing and textual criticism, and historiography no major piece of evidence has emerged to challenge the status of text.

To this trend, let's call it that, I should like to add a renewed interest in Shakespeare's life. Several new biographies of Shakespeare, some mixing fact with fiction, or, critical with creative, approaches to life, have been published recently, and this month a book will be published on Shakespeare's life in portraits that are allegedly of him. Again, writing a life of a major playwright seems to have cache in the world of Shakespeare scholarship or maybe in Anglo-American literary scholarship in general. (I am curious to know whether the same level of academic prestige goes with the publication of a new biography of Moliere or Racine in the academic circles in France.) These biographies review existing evidence, but in the absence of a major new find from Shakespeare's life, those biographies mostly re-interpret familiar evidence in a fresh way.

Moving from these textual and historicist approaches, we come to the second major trend in Shakespeare criticism, reflected in a growing interest in multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, global, and racial Shakespeare. These new approaches are intended to take him out of England and place him into the larger world of other languages, cultures, heritage, and racial belonging. Even theatre within Britain experiments with different directions commanded by globalization. In my view now is the time to promote 'Shakespeare in Serbia' kind of approach to Shakespeare, especially addressing new, and experimental, productions of which there are many, as far as I can tell, and offer it to the Anglophone scholarly scene that is increasingly interested in diversifying the content of its critical exploration.

BELLS: Shakespeare has lived with and in us for almost half a millennium. He has been a welcome *vade mecum* at all times. You developed an academic passion for Shakespeare: may I ask what he means to you, personally?

GORAN STANIVUKOVIĆ: There is hardly a situation in which a person can find herself as a human, political, and thinking being that Shakespeare does not stylize in his drama in particular. It is disconcerting to read and watch that one is never too young to die in Shakespeare. The more I read Shakespeare the more I find shockingly appealing, as dramatic art, his tendency, cold and powerful, to surprise you either with humanity or inhumanity of the humans. You can call it the perversion of my own critical mind to notice these things. After Prospero, aided by Ariel, has conjured up a deathly tempest that drowned almost the entire Italian crew and wrecked their ships, he still asks Ariel: “But are they safe?”. The other side of this kind of humanity is the cold-blooded retort “Kill Claudio” in *Much Ado About Nothing*, coming from a female lover. Or, when Iago says “What you know you know”, we should intuitively know what he means by that if we have listened him speak and watch him act in the course of the play. I am fascinated by how much such small and passing remarks reveal about Shakespeare’s creative mind and his dramatic skill; how much character there is in such utterances. One has to be careful not to succumb to bardolatry in saying things like the ones I have just said. But, for me personally, the appeal of Shakespeare lies in discovering such and other shocking revelations about agency, interiority, conflict between the individual and the external world, and the working of Shakespeare’s language as a carrier of meanings. In particular, I am drawn to Shakespeare’s language because of its opacity and by the theatricality of craft of his plays. We can read Shakespeare through any number of theoretical or ideological paradigms, and I have done that myself. But line after line, his text tells us, clearly, that the mechanics and craft of theatre are on his mind in the first instance. I continue to be puzzled by the fact that it is precisely the incommensurable nature of his language, that is, language that cannot ever be fully grasped and understood, dramatic utterance (the Shakespearean *parole*) that is often created on the spot, for a specific occasion, and never repeated again, out of the linguistic resource (the Shakespearean *langue*) that he had at hand. So much has been said about Shakespeare’s language, but we’re only just still uncovering how he makes it work. This, incidentally, is the subject of the book on which I am working now. I am interested in

Shakespeare's earliest styles; in exploring how he makes language work to help him think thoughts he needs to build characters and situations, and to make his theatre work.

Admittedly, I am also attracted by the romantic quality of his language, but at the same time by the ability to shatter romance through theatre, and reveal unspeakable cruelty, or an unexpected turn of the mind and agency. (It is that feature of Shakespeare that revealed to Freud some of the working of the subconscious.) Shakespeare is one of the most romantic (and erotic) of English poets; he is also a great skeptic about love, which makes him an almost anti-Renaissance poet. In a time like ours is, time that appears to approach love and desire from a certain ironic distance, it is refreshing to return to Shakespeare to hear the sound of love and disasters it can create. Here is an example of one of those sudden shifts in feeling and drama, where theatre, implicitly, becomes a reminder of a new reality, with love at its core. The first scene of the fifth act of *The Merchant of Venice* begins with what has sometimes been described as the moonlight sonata of this at once horrific and romantic play. Finally, Lorenzo and Jessica are alone, and he is courting her, as a Renaissance (and later Romantic) lover would, under the imagined or literary moon: "The moon shines bright. In such a night as this/When the sweet wind did gently kiss the trees/And they did make no noise, in such a night/Troilus methinks mounted the Trojan walls/And sighed his soul toward the Grecian tent,/where Cressid lay that night." Much can be said, critically, about Lorenzo playing Troilus to Jessica's Cressida. But for a long time, in the previous two centuries, this scene was sometimes either cut or cropped significantly, deemed to be too sentimental. In turn the play was robbed of its romantic quality. But Shakespeare never employs a device unless he needs it for theatre to achieve something central to the plot and story. At this point in *Merchant* he does not dwindle into sugary poetry of sentiments full of tedious repetitions, because, suddenly, his poetic faculties sagged. He creates a counterpoint to racial and religious hatred, viciousness, economic and financial disasters, a history of broken bonds between people, blood and breath-stopping tension on the brink of death in the court scene that has built up until the fifth act. If we recall that end places in Shakespearean drama—the last scene, the last act, the end of a half-scene—are places where important aspects in drama are emphasized, we might wish to ask ourselves, then, what sort of a play does Shakespeare want his audience to remember: one that is about love and that which constantly works against it in a world torn apart by money and trade; or one that is about race, anti-Semitism, corrupt Christianity, and human cruelty.

BELLS: A question concerning reality and poetry in Shakespeare. In connection with one of his masterful Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) productions, Cambridge scholar John Barton said that the most important thing to strive for in performing Shakespeare is truth: truth of reality but also poetry which is a little bit of a super-reality – rhythm and sound taking truth to the level of super-truth, uniting rational and irrational, real and supra-real. Many present-day stage productions of Shakespeare pay little attention to the phonic aspect of language thus divorcing meaning and sound. The same lack of awareness of phonic symbolism and the meaningful associative potential of sounds is also evident in translations of Shakespeare's works. Do you share my opinion that this is a major drawback?

GORAN STANIVUKOVIĆ: I wholeheartedly agree with you. Let us not forget that the idiom used in Shakespeare's England for going to the theatre was to "hear" a play, not "see" it, as we say today. Aural, not visual, features of the theatre made that institution a unique place. The stage was relatively barren and theatre unadorned. The cumulative visual effect, therefore, was limited, despite the occasional lavish costume. The spectacle of that theatre was in sound and movement, in words and action, in bodies and how they occupied space given to them for embodying meaning. Furthermore, Shakespeare, more than any of his contemporaries, except for Christopher Marlowe, has the ear especially tuned in to various forms of acoustic effects produced by patterns and repetitions in language, and keen on listening to the effect produced by rhetorical ornament, figures of speech. His dramatic ear was at home in producing rhythm and playing with sound. In his earliest plays and poetry sound *is* meaning and meaning is produced by rhythm, which he never uses unless he needs it for a theatrical effect. Richard III, for example, indulges in repetitions; rhythmic, almost hallucinatory, patterns of language; and bombastic rhetoric, not because his linguistic range is limited, but because his manner of ruling is based on patterned and repetitive acts: one after another, his victims, women and soldiers, are killed with ruthless repetition. To *hear* the sound of repetition in his language is to *see* (thus understand) the meaning of Richard III as a dramatic part.

BELLS: In one of your interviews (TV Novi Sad, *Vitraž*) you said that every generation should translate Shakespeare anew in order for it to be consonant with their own language, meaning, and emotional perception. It has caught my attention that in England of late there have been two opposite creative trends: on the one hand, a super-mega-hit musical *Miranda* adapted to this period in time has attracted tens of millions of viewers and spectators world-wide, and on the other, the Original Pronunciation RSC experimental performance of *Romeo and Juliette* has also found a responsive audience numbering in the thousands. New, updated and annotated editions of Shakespeare's works appear regularly. However, contrary to the view you expressed, Shakespeare in Serbian translations is already a sick man: now more than fifty years old and likely to be a hundred, given that the extant translation was reprinted with the blessing of an expert two years ago and so will go on circulating and perpetuating serious blunders for another fifty years before the last copy of the book is sold out and buried. I presume you are familiar with these facts although I do not know if you have done any research into the critical assessment of the quality of Serbian translations. People of your academic caliber could help stop this cultural disaster before the damage becomes irreparable.

GORAN STANIVUKOVIĆ: I do think that Shakespeare has to be reinterpreted for each generation. This is not so much the question of giving his work enduring vitality and long life, but demonstrating to each new generation what it can take out of Shakespeare's work to challenge, quibble with, or enjoy. Unfortunately, I do not have the opportunity to re-read the standard translation of Shakespeare into Serbian, which, I think, is still the one edited by Borivoje Nedić and Živojin Simić, and translated by a host of translators, who were, in their time, the best men (!) for the job. In the history of translating in the Serbian language, that translation occupies an important place. But reading it today, one finds it hard not to be aware of, say, archaisms, free renderings, and erroneous linguistic adaptations in it. At the beginning of my career, I was interested in Laza Kostić's translations of Shakespeare, and how he adapted Shakespeare's meter, mostly iambic pentameter, to the Serbian meter, where iambic pentameter was not as easily accommodated. I published a review essay on that topic in the Novi

Sad daily newspaper, *Dnevnik* long time ago. I was also intrigued by the first translation of the Ovidian minor epic, *Venus and Adonis*, into Serbian, by Aca Popović-Zub. That translation from the second half of the 19th century, printed in the print house of the Armenian monastery in Vienna, was the first translation of any of the complete texts by Shakespeare. But my examination of that charming and most certainly 'free' translation (possibly from German) of Shakespeare was more focused on situating the translation in the cultural context of the Serbian reception of Shakespeare as a Romantic phenomenon, rather than a critical assessment of the translation itself. But I haven't done any extensive critical examination of the translations that are presently used. That is beyond my reach right now, in part because I work outside the Serbian language.

BELLS: You said on one occasion that the author who influenced you most in your professional reading was your advisor, Professor Veselin Kostić. I have no doubt that you have, in turn, inspired many of your own colleagues and doctoral students, but my question for you now is: which of your doctoral students' dissertations have inspired you the most?

GORAN STANIVUKOVIĆ: A former student from Sheffield, who wrote a splendid thesis on the relationship between private theatre as a physical space and the masque, both as a stand-alone dramatic form and as embedded in longer drama, including Shakespeare, has inspired me to study the relationship between space and drama. The result of that work was a special issue on space, place, and style in Shakespeare of *Shakespeare*, journal of the British Shakespeare Association, which I guest edited a couple of years ago. Another doctoral thesis that has inspired me was by another student at Sheffield. The thesis (now published as a book) was on Ovid and early modern erotic poetry. The student was both a classicist and an early modernist, and working with her opened up a new window into the field of early modern studies of Ovid, another area that is close to my heart, since the time when I wrote my MA dissertation on Elizabethan minor epic at Belgrade.

BELLS: According to a phrase by Seneca the Younger, *docendo discimus*, we learn by teaching. What is it that you have learned from your students?

GORAN STANIVUKOVIĆ: Something that continues to fascinate and surprise me as a teacher is that my students hardly ever notice in a text what I assume they might notice, comment and ask questions about. Rather, they notice what has passed by me unnoticed or what I consider obvious and don't assume it need not be asked about. They teach me never to assume anything in teaching; they teach me that I should not assume that any detail, however trivial, is not worth a critical attention. Whenever a student begins a question with "Why…" I know that I am likely to have to work hard on the spot and come up with an adequate answer, or that I, too, would have to pay more attention to the issue at hand.

BELLS: Having known you to be a charismatic writer and professor, I suppose that you consider your profession a calling. Is there a message that you feel moved to share with us – your academic audience in Belgrade?

GORAN STANIVUKOVIĆ: It is true that professoriate has been my calling for the most part of my life as a trained academic. Literature has been my home ever since. When, year after year, in my classroom in Canada, I welcome what I call "refugee" students, students who start in non-literary fields but, suddenly, appear in the 2nd year of their studies, demoralized, wishing to study literature. They have discovered that they're "missing" (in their own words) something important in education, something they believe, even if they don't yet know that, only literature can give them. Those students tell me that they miss reading difficult texts! They tell me they miss speaking outside the logarithmic patterns and without challenging clichés, formulas, worked out paradigms. They want to weigh arguments, think critically, discover the unpredictable. When they "flee" to what they think is the freedom of literary studies, I know that we, in the English department, are doing something much more important than the world outside the humanities sees. This is not a message as much as sharing experience about what is likely to be a common problem: institutional and social withdrawal from cultural commitment to teaching literature in a value-for-money kind of approach to an increasingly corporatized higher education. But we always have the students, for whom these universities are founded after all, to tell the other story.

BELLS: Finally, it remains to be known: is there a question that you would like to have been asked?

GORAN STANIVUKOVIĆ: This is the most difficult question! I will try: Is Shakespeare the only literary pleasure, the only preoccupation, the only presence in my critical engagement with literature? Let's leave the answer to this unasked question for another occasion, another visit to Belgrade, maybe.

BELLS: Professor Stanivuković, it has been a privilege to speak with you. Thank you very much.

GORAN STANIVUKOVIĆ: Thank you.