Project MUSE®

SEL 45, 2 (Spring 2005): 461–479
ISSN 0039-3657

A Conversation with Sir Frank Kermode

LOGAN D. BROWNING

The ten-page article "Some Recent Studies in Shakespeare and Jacobean Drama" by Frank Kermode appeared in the first volume of *SEL* in the spring of 1961. Kermode, already highly admired in the scholarly world generally, but with the Arden edition of Shakespeare's *Tempest* then his only significant publication in the area of Renaissance drama, assessed the general state of the field, but focused particularly on four books and one journal: Alvin Kernan's *The Cankered Muse: Satire of the English Renaissance,* Jonas A. Barish's *Ben Jonson and the Language of Prose Comedy,* volume 11 of *Shakespeare Quarterly,* Bertrand Evans's *Shakespeare's Comedies,* and William Rosen's *Shakespeare and the Craft of Tragedy.* By contrast, Richard Dutton treats more than ninety books and journals in this issue's review essay, "Recent Studies in Tudor and Stuart Drama." On several occasions over the last few years, the editors of *SEL* have invited Kermode to reprise his role as review author for *SEL,* but, no doubt contemplating the immense amount of work involved, he declined each entreaty. He did, however, agree to submit this past October to the videotaping in his Cambridge flat of a full day of conversation between himself and *SEL*'s managing editor, Logan Browning, during which he registered his sense of the state of the profession of literary criticism and scholarship, with particular attention to Shakespeare and his contemporaries. What follows is based on a transcript of that 6 October 2004 conversation, excerpted and emended occasionally in light of subsequent conversations and correspondence.

BROWNING: Frank, thanks for talking to me today and having me here to let you make up for your refusal to do another *SEL* review of recent studies.

KERMODE: You were asking me for a solid year's work.

BROWNING: That's right. And so we will try to squeeze that into one brief conversation today.

KERMODE: Okay.

BROWNING: But I thought we might begin by asking you to recall, if you can, the circumstances of producing that first review of recent studies of Elizabethan and Jacobean drama for *SEL* in 1961. I think you were still at Manchester?

KERMODE: In 1961, I was—yes, I was still at Manchester. As to how the invitation came to do that piece I am afraid I am a complete blank. I had no connection, as far as I know, with anybody at SEL. I think it must have just come in out of the blue. Somebody desperate at your end of the thing thought let's try him.

BROWNING: Had you met the editor, Carroll Camden, before?

KERMODE: No, I had never met him in my life.

BROWNING: So he apparently went through the current literature and settled upon you.

KERMODE: Well, a great honor. Thank you.

BROWNING: I thought I would start by asking for your reaction now to some of the suggestions and claims you made in 1961. For instance, you noted that English literary history, by contrast with American, lacked "an apparent vitality, a topical quality" owing to its "deep foundations, its solid substructure of fact and received opinion." And then you suggested that "major cartographical changes" are therefore slow to appear. What contrasts, if any, would you now draw between American and English literary history or literary criticism more generally?

KERMODE: I think the whole position has changed radically on both sides of the ocean in the nearly fifty years since then. There are big institutional changes in America which are perfectly obvious. It is the fact that the teaching of literature as a subject in its own right, you know, has rather faded. And what you have got instead is cultural history. A lot of political interests have intruded, which were kept out—apparently kept out—all those years ago. And this has happened more in America than here partly because of Oxford and Cambridge, I think, continuing their old system of one-to-one teaching. So you get a great range of attitudes. But all of them, really—or most of them—have a literary

base. Whereas, the big names in American academic criticism now are not really interested in literature at all, it seems to me. They are interested in contemporary history. They are interested in the whole movement of new historicism, as it is called. They have tremendous intake from French theory, particularly from [Jacques] Derrida. And this involves the whole business of literary criticism in America in writers like [Gilles] Deleuze, [Michel] Foucault, or [Jacques] Lacan, and so on, who are not really literary critics at all, you see. So the subject has been spread out in a way that has actually made the part of literature much smaller than it used to be—or so it looks from here anyway.

BROWNING: You thought you detected a downward revision of Jacobean drama in 1961, especially that of [John] Webster. And you suggested that a number of Jacobean authors deserved better editions and critical attention. Have those perceived wrongs been righted for the most part?

KERMODE: I think there have been serious efforts to remedy the lack of strict editorial attention to the minor Jacobean playwrights. For example, there is now an edition—a full-scale edition of [Philip] Massinger. There already was an edition of Webster, but it has been improved or modified; so, too with [Francis] Beaumont and [John] Fletcher. Yes, a great deal of basic editorial work, which was not in existence in 1961, has been done. That thread, or that aspect, of our subject has not been neglected. There are always people who are willing to undertake strict editorial work. And of course it has become very much more technical and sophisticated, more general—I mean, now the interest in Elizabethan printing—in the practices of the Elizabethan printing house in proofing and all that, all that has been much—has become much more important. In fact, a book like [Charlton] Hinman's book *The Printing and Proof-Reading of the First Folio of Shakespeare* didn't come out I think until '63. And that was a big—a big switch in attitude to the Shakespeare text, for instance.

BROWNING: Are there still Renaissance playwrights and poets who deserve far better editions?

KERMODE: I think there must be. There must be. There are good single-volume editions of people like [Cyril] Tourneur. There is no full-scale edition of Middleton which does seem to me a real lack—I believe that is being worked on, though. Large questions of attribution arise, I know—and they become, as I say, increasingly technical. There is very little interest for the general reader

in these editions, but they are important, and are correctives to the cheap editions, often really pseudo-editions, which we use from day to day.

BROWNING: You suggested in 1961 that the principal trap to be avoided for such a journal as *Shakespeare Quarterly*, for which you registered much admiration in the review, was "that stifling coziness, the business of all being Shakespeare-lovers together." Is this still a clear and present danger for editors of such journals?

KERMODE: Clear and present danger? There is danger which threatens Shakespeare at all times. The worst of them is a kind of sentimentality, I think. But we have been bombarded with biographies these days. There is one in full public attention at the moment, [Stephen] Greenblatt's *Will in the World*, which of course is intelligent but still sentimental, I think. There is this feeling that you can say almost anything as long as it is rather loving about Shakespeare. And I have always thought as a teacher, one needs to be able to say that Shakespeare is often a very bad writer. To assume that everything about him is perfect is—is destructive. The whole thing ceases to be of very much interest. I came across the other day a remark about Shakespeare which I thought characterizes a lot of the work that we have seen. There is a Scotsman—unnamed Scotsman—who wanted Shakespeare to be a Scotsman, you see. And when someone pointed out to him that there is absolutely no evidence for this, he said, "But the ability of the man supports the presumption." See, you can make him anything you like. You know, the fashion nowadays, of course, is to make him a Lancashire Catholic, more or less. That is shorthand for a very long, and to my mind, misled chain of research that has been going on to prove that, if we have to believe what we are told now, Shakespeare is not only a Catholic but almost became a Jesuit missionary. Now, for this you can say there is absolutely no real evidence at all, but you might say the ability of the man supports—supports the idea.

BROWNING: You've not been won over to that idea even by Tony Holden in *William Shakespeare: His Life and Work* [1999]?

KERMODE: I think Tony keeps—keeps his cool about it. It is Greenblatt that has actually swallowed it, yes. Yes.

BROWNING: You have read the new Greenblatt biography?

KERMODE: Yes, I have. Yes.

BROWNING: I heard part of it last night on Radio 4—it's being excerpted there—

KERMODE: Oh, really?

BROWNING: Yes at half after midnight.

KERMODE: A good time for it. Well, of course he is an exceedingly clever man, a great ability, great intellectual power, I think. But sometimes, as I have labored to demonstrate, very often simply wrong.

BROWNING: What about the whole idea of a biography of Shakespeare? You have come out with *The Age of Shakespeare.*

KERMODE: My little book *The Age of Shakespeare* is neither here nor there. I mean, it is just meant to fill a corner in a series. So I wouldn't—let's not talk about that. No. But there have been biographies of all sorts recently, like Park Honan's and Holden's and Katherine Duncan-Jones's, which has a welcome astringency and now Greenblatt's. It seems to me that we could do with an easing up on this multiplicity of books on Shakespeare. I know people have said this before—let's have a moratorium. Nobody pays any attention. *Shakespeare Quarterly* still lists over 4,000 titles per annum, and nobody can control that mass of material. So it is all self-defeating in a way.

BROWNING: Would you have any interest in seeing more performance-based criticism?

KERMODE: Well, there is a lot of that about now, and I suppose it's good. I noticed that in the new Arden Shakespeares there is a long section on performance criticism—and there are lots of photographs and so on. They don't tell me a lot, I think. Far better the report of a good critic on the actual performance at the time. I don't really want to know all the different ways in which you can dress *Troilus and Cressida,* you know. Sometimes it can be Edwardian, sometimes First World War and that kind of thing—pushing it about in a kind of desperate attempt to make sense of it, to give it some relevance to current issues. Well, I think Shakespeare does have relevance to current issues. *Troilus* is a very, very interesting study of value. But you can't bring that about by putting people in top hats and saying this is the kind of war they had at Troy. The people who do Shakespeare on the stage are often very good. And the quality of English acting is still very high; but it is the directors very often, I think, who get in and spoil it.

BROWNING: What do you think of Sir Peter Hall's ideas about the delivery of the verse?

KERMODE: It is interesting that you bring up Peter Hall on the delivery of the verse. He ought to know about it, as he has been doing it for half a century. What amazed me about his book is that he tells actors of the Royal Shakespeare Company and similar companies things that they ought to have been taught at school, taught when they were 15. He tells them what an iambic line is. He tells them these very elementary things. And my God, that does make a difference. Of course they really should have known it when they were doing O levels. So it is surprising that somebody as talented and powerful as Hall should feel the necessity to take all the actors back to school, but he does.

BROWNING: Are you a fan of the reconstructed Globe?

KERMODE: I am, actually. I am a convert to the reconstructed Globe. I am very sorry that the guy who has been running it all these years is leaving at the end of 2005, because that might make a big change.

BROWNING: Mark Rylance?

KERMODE: Yes. I was very skeptical about it in the early days because it seems a pointless piece of archeology, really. You know, why set up a stage which is true to the stage of 1598 but not true to anything in the theater since then? However, having been there and seen Rylance's performances, I think it is very good. They are not all good, of course. There was a magnificent *Antony and Cleopatra* by an all-male cast. It was terrific. With Rylance as Cleopatra, you would think that was a mere stunt but, in fact, I thought it went very well. Who do you think did play Cleopatra in—back in 1606 or whatever it was? Was it a boy? Was it a squeaking Cleopatra, as Shakespeare put it? Or was it a kind of countertenor? Or was it a grown man with a woman's voice? Nobody knows that quite. Boys—normally their voices break at what, thirteen or fourteen? You couldn't have a thirteen-year-old boy playing Cleopatra. So it is a very interesting question. And all those questions Rylance sort of met head on, I think. Very bold, very intelligent. I thought it was excellent.

BROWNING: What were some of the details of his performance that you enjoyed?

KERMODE: Well, he was perhaps a little bit too flirty. But apart from that, he did—he did look like a mature woman. And he looked

like a mature woman with a passion for a particular man. All that went very well. It is a long play, of course. You very soon forgot to think, isn't it extraordinary that the man should be playing Cleopatra. It just became part of the act.

BROWNING: I saw an all-male *Twelfth Night* there. Did you see that, as well?

KERMODE: I didn't see the *Twelfth Night*.

BROWNING: I thought it was also successful. Now I hear they are doing a reconstructed Rose Theatre in Kingston, or at a least a theater based on the Rose.

KERMODE: Oh, are they?

BROWNING: It is going up, and Peter Hall is supposed to do the first production I think in November or something like that. [Sir Peter Hall did direct a production of *As You Like It*, which starred his daughter Rebecca Hall as Rosalind, in December 2004 in the shell of the new theater.]

KERMODE: Oh, really? Where did you say this was? In Kingston. What is in Kingston? What is it doing in Kingston?

BROWNING: I don't know. I don't know who organized that. [Sir Peter Hall is chancellor of Kingston University and the new theater will have a strong relationship to the university, most notably in offering England's only postgraduate degree in theater.] I heard about it just before coming over to England.

KERMODE: Of course the Rose is archeologically more available than the Globe was, and so they will probably get it right.

BROWNING: Over the years, have there been performances that absolutely changed your sense of a play that left you feeling illuminated in some—

KERMODE: Yes. Yes. Performances that have illuminated the plays for me. Over the years, I can think of several, actually. I can think—just to go back a long way to *The Winter's Tale* as done by [John] Gielgud and Diana Wynyard, I—I don't know when that was. I think 40 years ago. The performance, particularly the performance of the closing scene, did entirely change that play for me. And ever since when I have seen the play, I have always remembered that performance. In fact, my next most memorable performance is the Moscow state theater a few years ago. It was in Russian with Shakespearean surtitles. And it was very free

with the play, but it was very beautiful. I remember running into Michael Kustow, who has directed many plays, in the bar at the end of the performance . . . And he was just stunned. You could see why. He said, "We are just playing with these things. These people really know about them. These people can act." And they were quite wonderful. Very, very powerful. Very moving. But there have been other things. A whole series of *Lear*s, for example. Notably with Michael Hordern. It has been one of the triumphs of Jonathan Miller, I think. He has done *Lear* several times. I think three. Usually with Hordern, and always marvelous. And as I said before, we do have actors of very high quality, not all of them famous.

BROWNING: You're naming actors and you're saying very powerful, moving; but could you be a bit more specific about what in some of these productions was especially illuminating?

KERMODE: Well, I have seen very recent performances of the Sam West *Hamlet*, which I thought was very high quality. But there have been several that I haven't seen which apparently are also found to be very high quality. I think you can always depend on nobody being cast as Hamlet in one of the national companies who is not a very good actor.

BROWNING: Did you like the performance that had the very young boy playing Hamlet at the National Theatre?

KERMODE: I missed that, I think. Oh no, I did see that, but clearly it didn't make much of an impression.

BROWNING: No. I heard a good bit about it. But I really want to ask you, if we can go back to some of those older performances, what—what especial way did your readings or understandings of the play change because you saw these prodictions? I mean, it was uplifting and moving, but is there something more? Did you understand some stage business better—

KERMODE: I can give you one or two examples of that. I mentioned *The Winter's Tale* and the Diana Wynyard statue scene which was such a scene. There is another one which I will never forget, was the Peter Brook *Lear* of 1962 or '63, which actually I saw in New York with Paul Scofield as Lear. That—there was a scene in that which I shall never forget because of the intelligence with which it was directed. It [V.ii] was a very short scene, ten or eleven lines, where Edgar has taken his blind father and deposited him and said, "Stay under this tree. I will just go and join the battle, and then maybe I will come back and take you

away." And so you have this old man on the stage. His eyes have been torn out. He just sits there—faint noises of the battle—sort of sniffing. And after a pause so extended that you can see the director must have been thinking this has got to last as long as I can possibly hold it, then Edgar comes back. They have lost. They have lost the battle. So he says to him, "Come on. Let's move on." And the old man says, "No. I can rot here, which is perfectly okay with me." You know, where he fell. And Edgar says, "You have got to move. Ripeness is all"—a very famous line—"Ripeness is all. Come on. Come on." And the Folio only adds another word from Gloucester, "And that's true too." And that is absolute—that scene which could last five or six minutes is so full of sense and meaning and pathos that I have never forgotten what the actor looked like—it was a man called John Laurie, I remember, in New York—as he sat there holding it all that time. So the more you think about that scene, the stranger it is. As far as I know, there is no other scene in Shakespeare when an actor goes out and then there's silence and then the actor comes back. There is a kind of custom which you can infer from the plays—that when an actor leaves, something else always happens before he comes back. But this breaks that rule. It gives the silence itself the value of an important speech, you see. And then he comes back, and it is over. And it all contributes. What is going to happen next is that the blind Gloucester is going to meet the mad Lear, you know. You are being dumped in the pathetic at this stage. And that is, to my mind, one of the great scenes in Shakespeare. And a great deal of credit goes—well, of course, Brook was and perhaps is a director of genius, and he saw what that scene was for. You could actually leave it out, almost, you know, if you were cutting heavily; but you would lose a lot.

BROWNING: I forget whether that scene made it into the film or not?

KERMODE: He did the film, yes. Yes. I liked the film, but I can't remember too much about it, you know. I remember talking to one of the cast—Irene Worth who was Goneril in the film. She said the film—this is gossip, of course—was one of the most miserable periods of her life because they—he insisted on shooting it in Jutland in the depth of winter. She said, "We spent all our time shivering in ditches." He wanted them to go through it, you see. He wanted the entire cast to be deeply miserable.

BROWNING: Are you generally well disposed to films of Shakespeare or are they primarily of archival value to you?

KERMODE: Of course there are a great many more of them than I have seen— I don't count the Russian and Japanese films because they are not English language. So—I mean, they have their own splendors, obviously. There are a lot of bad Shakespeare films, I think, that are really terrible. *Love's Labour's Lost* not long ago and years ago an appalling *Antony and Cleopatra* with Charlton Heston in it. And perhaps I shouldn't say these things. You will be getting sued. He was the head of the gun lobby, wasn't he?

BROWNING: He was.

KERMODE: Yes, well of course some of the films are bad and some are good. [Kermode has recently written for the 6 January 2005 issue of the *London Review of Books* a largely favorable review of the recent Michael Radford film version of *Merchant of Venice* starring Al Pacino as Shylock and Jeremy Irons as Bassanio.]

BROWNING: Did you get caught up in *Shakespeare in Love*?

KERMODE: No. I hated *Shakespeare in Love*. I had been ill and Ursula [Owen] dragged me to see it. And I don't like the cinema anyway because I can't smoke. I can't stand the smell of popcorn. That is one problem. But there are others. I can't stand the noise. I can't stand the ads. I can't say anything about them, though. *Shakespeare in Love* seemed to me just a kind of appalling racket. One or two good jokes in it about Webster, actually. That is about it. You know, "now or never" Shakespeare. Is there a sort of controversy about the film?

BROWNING: Not a controversy. It registered with many American students in a way I don't remember anything else associated with Shakespeare doing for a very long time. They all seem to have seen it when they get to university. They all seem to react really alertly when you mention it to them.

KERMODE: Of course there is the Baz Luhrmann *Romeo and Juliet* which somebody sent me a tape of. Hell—that was absolute hell. I couldn't bear that one at all, but I gather it is all the rage in the undergraduate population.

BROWNING: It is.

KERMODE: My friend Richard Poirier said all you can do with students, really, is to teach them to be good readers. You can't teach them to be good people. You can't teach them to be good citizens. All you can do is teach them to read and let what happens follow from there. You can argue, if you want; but bad reading has sometimes been the cause of great—great trouble in the

world. Bad reading of the Bible is one example. So you could say that you have a corrective power over your students. But they are very unlikely to pay a lot of attention to your particular ethical attitude. Some will and some won't. In other words, you might say we all have been largely wasting our time over the last however many years, since the number of people teaching literature in the world is so enormous, especially in America. How many members of the MLA? 25,000 or something like that? All of them teaching young people how to read—or supposedly doing that. Are they changing society? I don't believe they are. So on one view, it is a complete waste of everybody's time. On another view, a society must be more interesting if people are subtle readers. The claim that you can make without much fear of contradiction is quite a small claim. This is one view. I would like somebody to say, "You have got this wrong. The world would be a much worse place if we didn't teach literature at the university." Some people probably believe that. I am skeptical.

BROWNING: You did say in your revised *Romantic Image*, in an addendum to the original in 2002, that you still believed that criticism could have a civilizing force. Is that something different from what you are talking about?

KERMODE: No. I suppose it isn't, really. It is about the same. That is a very vague thing, a civilizing force. And that is the best we could hope for.

BROWNING: So you couldn't be more specific in some particular outcome you would like to see as a result of your criticism or someone else's?

KERMODE: What we—what do we expect to see in the people who have gone through our hands as it were? Which over a normal career of 40 years, say, is a hell of a lot of people. Are they making a difference to the world? I don't know how you would ever measure that. What—what happens is that you have a few students who have a kind of discipular relationship to you. They stay with you throughout your life. They become professors. They go and teach in Taiwan or somewhere. Now, particularly with e-mail, they are in touch all the time. But they are an infinitesimal proportion of the people you teach. When I taught in Houston, both at the university and at your university, at Rice, I—over the few years I was there—must have taught at least a couple of hundred students. I can think of only one of them that I can actually attribute anything to, you know, any sense of the literary personality. The rest of them I am afraid just disappeared from the memory.

BROWNING: You did talk in your memoir *Not Entitled* about a class you had at the University of Houston. And you did attribute to them a lesson you thought you had learned there, that the best possible way to teach people to appreciate poetry and the various forms of poetry was to have them produce the same sort of form they were reading. Do you still feel that way?

KERMODE: Because I don't teach anymore, it is hard for me to say whether I think that is a good teaching practice. It probably is, but you see it requires a set of circumstances which don't recur in most places. All those people I was teaching were graduates—and they were all people who had been in the creative writing department under good teachers who actually were interested in the formal qualities of literature. So if they told them to write a villanelle, they wrote a villanelle. They found out how to do it, and they did it. So with a Petrarchan sonnet or sonnet in Shakespearean form. So when they came to develop a more critical attitude to these sonnets or whatever form they might be, you know, terza rima or whatever, they had the advantage of having done it themselves, however badly. It would be very surprising if someone in a musical conservatory or musical department at a university had actually never written any music, however simple—just a few exercises in counterpoint or something like that. You would think it very odd if they had not done that. By chance the structure of study at Houston meant that for once people who are studying literary criticism have actually written something which has a formal resemblance to, for example, a poem by [George] Herbert, an acrostic poem, the kinds of things that mean very little if you haven't actually done them yourself. That's where I think that arrangement—which is quite fortuitous, you know, they just happened to be doing the courses in that order—works. So I suppose I do think that it would be a great advance if we saw that the teaching of people to read and write actually included the teaching of how to use certain kinds of arbitrary forms that are traditional in the business just as—just as Mozart knew about sonata form at the age of seven or whatever. I don't mean they all have to be geniuses. But, I mean, there are a hundred other composers who perfectly well know what a sonata is and have written sonatas, however bad they might be, before they start talking about the late Beethoven and so on. So you see that is a great advantage.

BROWNING: Let's circle back for a moment to the Renaissance and talk a bit about the editing you have done, particularly of Shake-

speare texts. I know you are very fond of the Riverside edition. But would you care to recap the relative merits of, say, the Riverside versus the Norton and other more recent editorial projects?

KERMODE: As to modern editions, I suppose you would regard it as a natural prejudice in favor of the one that I did myself or partly did myself. The Riverside has the advantage of being—well, it is less adventurous than the Oxford or what I believe is now the Norton. I think they took over the Oxford, didn't they? It is conservative compared with Oxford, but it's good. And it has the advantage of being the text for the great six-volume concordance of Marvin Spevack. You really have to have the Riverside if you are going to use that—it gives us a foothold, I think. But the other kinds of edition, the multi-volume editions? The Arden, which I think is now in its third avatar, is a mess, frankly. I think it is terrible. Partly because my own volume in it has been superseded. Oh, they did, in fact, ask me to do it again. I don't know who the people are that did the new one, but they are certainly not people whose work I approve of. And that is, I think, generally true—the Arden Shakespeare, in my view, has been, in the popular expression, "completely dumbed down." It used to be by far the best multi-volume edition, I think. I don't think many people disputed that. Lots of others, like the Signet and so on, are perfectly okay but they're a much smaller scale. People spent years doing a play for the Arden series. And they also did it for love because there was absolutely no profit in it. But that has not been the case now. There are many other series, to some of which I have actually contributed, which are perfectly okay but not serious. Not that the Arden is really an edition in the full sense of the word. People haven't actually collated every extant copy or quarto or whatever it is. That—that kind of edition I suppose we don't really have. I never thought of that before. We have facsimiles and reprints, the Malone Society kind of thing, but we don't have one for every play. I am thinking out loud now. There are one or two excellent single volumes, René Weis's *King Lear*, for example, which is an excellent parallel text edition. So it goes on. We are continuing—and high-powered work is done by people like [Peter W. M.] Blayney, on Elizabethan printing house practice, who actually knows the weight of lead the particular printer had to buy in order to print a particular book and that kind of thing. All that eventually has a bearing on the text. And I mentioned Hinman. But the Hinman book, which is a sort of landmark book, really, a huge affair, where he actually made this machine, an optical machine, on which he was able to collate copies to show that they were often corrected

while they were in the press and often badly corrected while in the press. And some very informative things were learned: we were also able to identify particular compositors, who did this bit, who that, able to show that some passages mysteriously appearing as prose, when we know that they should be verse, are like that because the printer had miscalculated the space he had, and had to crush the stuff together to get it in. And so all of that kind of information only became available really with the new bibliography of the early part of the twentieth century. And then Hinman's machine meant that multiple copies in the Folger Shakespeare library in Washington—I think there are about 87 of them—could be collated. So now—now the Hinman machine can be found in most big libraries across England, I think. Well, the interesting thing about Hinman, I thought, was that, although he taught us so much about that huge book, the First Folio, he didn't actually at any point change a reading in the text there. He opened up opportunities, perhaps, for other people to do that. And he eliminated some possibilities, too. And he solved an awful lot of other problems, like whether this should be verse or prose and so on. But it is still very hard to beat the old eighteenth-century editors who knew nothing about all this, you see, but who did know that that word really can't be right and we must put something else in its place.

BROWNING: Are you generally well-disposed to printing these parallel texts? In American classrooms now we almost never teach *Lear* without spending some time talking about the various versions of the play. Or *Othello*, the same thing of course.

KERMODE: I think it is proper to do that, yes. It's always said—that every edition of *King Lear* that we ever used, until more recently, was a composite made up of the two texts. I don't absolutely subscribe to the total separation of the two, actually. I think parallel texts are the answer, until you get into very much more high tech editing now where you, oh I can't remember what they call it now, but this new style of presenting text that Jerome McGann from Virginia does with Rossetti. It is all online, of course. That is, that's beyond my technical powers, I am afraid. I don't know anything about that. But I have been—have had an interesting experience lately, if I may talk about something I am doing at the moment.

BROWNING: Please.

KERMODE: First, I am trying to write a libretto for an opera based on *Lear*, by Sandy Goehr—Alexander Goehr, who used to be the

professor of music here and is now retired. He badly wants to do an opera on *Lear*. And so I have had to get down to this daunting task—*Lear* is a long play. Here's a really simple problem. I think it is almost as long as *Hamlet*, 3,800 lines or something like that. Well, an opera or libretto can't be more than about 1,000 or 1,500. So you have got to chuck away two-thirds of the play. And in order to do that, you have got to think of different ways of presenting what's left. So I have been having a struggle with this. I have got a notebook full of ideas which I discuss with Goehr. But I am making the point for this reason: I have found for my purposes I can use Quarto or Folio. I can do anything I like because I am not doing an edition. I am doing something that is meant to be set to music, which is a totally different kind of consideration. And why not have the best of both Q and F if you are doing that—a piece of this, a piece of that? I will get shot for it, of course. He will get shot for it, too, if we ever live to see it. But it is a huge task. It doesn't sound it, but it really is daunting. That is why I was so interested in Arrigo Boito and the way he handled *Othello* for Verdi's *Otello*. Boito was a very experienced opera composer himself and a good poet. And it is a model, really. His libretto for *Otello* is a brilliant reduction, absolutely brilliant. A wonderful cut. They cut the whole of the first act. They just took it out completely, you see. I have been emulating them in editing. A different approach is that of Thomas Ades, whose opera *The Tempest* has a libretto containing not a line of the original, though many that stay close.

BROWNING: You are not turning to Nahum Tate for inspiration, are you?

KERMODE: No. Not Nahum Tate, no. It would be a further complexity. I am not going to do that, no. Anyway, I don't know how I started talking about that. You are quite right, I think. It should not be concealed from students that there are two versions of *King Lear*. It shouldn't be overdone, though, I think. I don't agree that there are two separate plays.

BROWNING: For which Shakespeare plays is it most important to bring this awareness of multiple versions to students?

KERMODE: Well, *Lear* and *Othello*. *Othello* is odder, in fact, isn't it? Think—you have to take *Othello* without the willow scene in it, for example. Very surprising. But certainly *Othello* and *Lear*—I don't think there is another place you ever get this problem in such a straightforward way. Do you find that your students are interested in this sort of thing?

BROWNING: Yes, they are, though it often seems to require bringing very specific passages, you know, to their attention. If they look, say, at the very end of *Lear*—

KERMODE: Yes. There was a famous question: "Who delivers the last speech?" Which to my mind is not an important question, but it is treated as one. It doesn't seem to me to matter much. They could do it chorally—they could do it together.

BROWNING: Recently in the *TLS*, Barbara Everett was writing about *Hamlet* and taking up some of your ideas about the significance of *Hamlet* in the history of tragedy.

KERMODE: I admire Barbara Everett. It is easy to be very boring about *Hamlet*, I think. It is not her fault. It is my fault. I get bored with criticism of *Hamlet*, but I don't know what to do.

BROWNING: She took up your suggestion that this was the most significant tragedy in roughly 2000 years. Would you still say that?

KERMODE: Well, I think it is simple history. It could be the last important tragedies, shall we say, before the Globe opened, were Sophocles' and Euripides'. And that is a good 2,000 years. Everything was right for *Hamlet* to be an important play at a new playhouse: a writer who was now certainly at the height of his power, the invention of the meditative soliloquy which we associate largely with *Hamlet*, new styles of acting which were actually reported in *Hamlet*. You know, everything made for a new, as it turned out, very brief period where it was possible to write profound tragedy. Nearly ten years—ten years, you see, between *Hamlet* and *Coriolanus*—really eight years. And there were good Jacobean plays which you have mentioned before, but there is no solid body of tragedy. Great comic writers, like Middleton, amazing one-off tragedies like—like the *Revenger's Tragedy* or *The Changeling*, which I've been reading. *The Changeling* is a wonderful play, you see.

BROWNING: Are you reading it for a particular project, or—

KERMODE: Yes. I was, yes. I have finished it now. Random House have had on their list for many years a rather unsatisfactory collection of Jacobean drama. And they asked me to do another one to replace it. It will be out next [2005] spring sometime, but it is not important as an edition. It is just kind of—it has got *The Duchess of Malfi* and *The Changeling* and *The Revenger's Tragedy*. It is a very bloody collection, in fact; but they seem okay with it. They call it Webster. They have given Webster the leading—the

top billing, you know, which I perhaps wouldn't have done. But it is their book. They can do what they like with it.

BROWNING: Are you comfortable with the prediction that before long so much of our textual experience of the world will be online? I know you have become quite a handy user of e-mail, but—

KERMODE: Well, I am comfortable with it because—perhaps stubbornly, I don't believe that the book is obsolete. We keep being told that the book is obsolete, but it is a very useful research instrument, the book. I don't see it going out of fashion completely. But a lot of stuff is much better online. For example, the new *Dictionary of National Biography* is online. And anybody who pays £7,500 for it, for the book version of it, is out of his mind. I mean, what you can do is rent the right to use the database, and the database can be changed every day. The DNB, the new version, includes people who died before the 31st of December 1999, I think it is. Well, I mean, since then quite a lot of people have died. They probably are already in the database, but they are not in the work. So, in fact, that is a case where I think the book is obsolete. The same will be true of any large reference book, I think, yes. Perhaps the *Encyclopedia Britannica.* I don't know. But people go on about the death of the book. And it is like the death of the author. None of these things actually happen.

BROWNING: Would you talk some about your feelings about one of your most recent books, *Shakespeare's Language*?

KERMODE: Yeah. Well, I picked up a lot of pieces that I dropped over the years, and I think—I think it needed doing. It had—its success was far in excess of anything I ever dreamt of, of course. It has been academically a best seller and the only book of mine that sold 50,000 copies. So it can't be bad, can it? On the other hand, it is an old man's book. You know, it hasn't got "The roll, the rise, the carol, the creation," I'm afraid. It is rather slow. I think—I am afraid that it is true that there is a point beyond which you—your powers are not what they were, you know. And I think I have reached that some years ago, probably. I still do my little bits and pieces.

BROWNING: You certainly do. Do you —do you still in the main feel happy that you divided your energies between journalism and more academic scholarship?

KERMODE: Oh, yes. Yes. I think so.

BROWNING: Do you think the one reinforced the other?

KERMODE: The interesting thing was that the job I had in London at University College was always really intended to do that, to have someone who had a footing in the London literary scene as well as in the college. And so I fitted that bill. Karl Miller followed me, and he was followed by John Sutherland, both good journalists as well as scholars. It is a good tradition. I don't think there should be a divorce between—between academic studies and the literary world generally. It is a very good—it is a very good thing to have that link, I think.

BROWNING: Well, one last question. Even as recently as a month ago, a *TLS* reviewer was noting that in a collection of interviews with Iris Murdoch, yours was about the best of the lot. You have been an accomplished interviewer. You were talking at lunch about interviewing Graham Greene and others. So let me ask the old chestnut interview question: If you were conducting an interview of yourself, what is a really important question that you should be asked?

KERMODE: I don't know. Perhaps I should take the line that Iris took over that interview—she wanted a transcript which she then rewrote. So, in fact, her replies are the things that are reported there and not things she actually said to me, but are developments of such things. And so that is what I will do. Please send me a complete transcript, and I will rewrite it so I can say what I intended. Now, that was an occasion—that was something that was commissioned by *Partisan Review*, by the way, a list of current novelists. I forget who else was in there—Greene, Murdoch. Angus Wilson was one. And John Wain, now I suppose sadly, a forgotten novelist. I can't remember who the others were. But I did about eight or nine of them, and they did appear in the *Partisan Review* under the title of *House of Fiction*. And it has been reprinted lots of times, the whole thing. The Murdoch thing—I don't think Iris later on gave interviews. That was a long, long time ago. That was—good God, I can't remember when it was. It was about 1967 or '68 or something like that, when we were young and fresh. Iris was exactly the same age as me. She used to say, "I hope you are working hard. We haven't got much time left." Which happened to be true in her case.

BROWNING: Well, Frank, thank you very much. You will get—you will get the transcript very soon.

KERMODE: Okay. Thank you, Logan. Thank you. God knows what I've been talking about, but it is all on the record.

BROWNING: Charles [Martinez, the videographer], do you have any questions?

MARTINEZ: I first came across you here, when you were moving house, and you had that catastrophe.

KERMODE: Oh, God. Yes. Yes. Yes. The destruction of my library. Well, in a way it was a good thing because where would I have put them? But they—they were the best books. They were the books I valued most. How did you come across me there?

MARTINEZ: I don't know. In the local press.

KERMODE: I see.

MARTINEZ: The same thing had happened to a friend of mine in [Wimbledon], a photographer who lost all his negatives, all his life's work.

KERMODE: It was a terrible blow at the time. I thought I would never get over this, but a couple of days later I was over it in a sense, you know. You have to go on living, and—especially when you are moving house. There is too much to do. I think it was—I tell you, we were talking earlier about the press and its inability to get anything right. Well, I didn't tell anybody about that. I certainly didn't tell any journalist about it, and it didn't appear in any newspaper for about two months. And then there was a piece in the *Guardian* somewhere. And then it hit all the other papers. And as it moved from paper to paper, the number of books that got lost went up and up and up. So I think—the actual number of books lost we knew fairly accurately because we had a list of them. It was just under 2,000. But by the time it got to the *Sunday Times* about three months later, it was 20,000. I said, "Where did you think I would put 20,000 books in a flat?" You know, they weren't even thinking about it. Just the first figure—2,000, 20,000, what does it matter? That is my case against the press.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks to Charles Martinez for his videotaping services, Doug Killgore for converting the original tapes into a variety of formats, and Linda Hogan for her painstaking transcription of the taped conversation. Support for this interview was provided by the Hobby Family Foundation.