

## Interview: Tiffany Stern, University of Oxford

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*At the time of this interview, Tiffany Stern was Professor of Early Modern Drama and Beaverbrook and Bouverie Fellow in English at University College, Oxford. She is now Professor and Chair of Shakespeare and Early Modern Literature at Royal Holloway, University of London. She is the author of several influential books on early modern theatrical practice: Rehearsal from Shakespeare to Sheridan (2000), Making Shakespeare: From Stage to Page (2004), Shakespeare in Parts (co-authored with Simon Palfrey, 2007), and Documents of Performance in Early Modern England (2009). In addition, she has edited several editions of individual plays and is one of the General Editors of the Fourth Series of the Arden Shakespeare. I had the chance to sit down with her in early July 2016 – a week after the Brexit vote – in her office at University College. We discussed her life and work, editing and collaboration, Shakespeare’s context and theatrical conditions, Shakespeare studies at Oxford and elsewhere, and current events. Below is a transcript of that conversation.*

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**Spiro:** What brought you to the study of Shakespeare?

**Stern:** When I was a child, I had an uncle who was a director. And he made his money directing a British soap opera called *Brookside*, which is about a little close [a residential street] in Liverpool. Over the years the characters on the show all would fall in love with one another, out of love with one another, kill one another, commit suicide, get AIDS... and eventually they had done everything – there was no more that people who are in a close can do with one another – and the soap opera came to an end. But this uncle who was directing that soap opera, his *real* passion was Shakespeare, and he had a Shakespeare company. And so whenever he wasn’t directing the soap opera, he was taking his little no-money company around. It was called The Original Shakespeare Company, and the idea was that they did Shakespeare in “the original way.” Of course, I have quotation-marks around all those words but at the time, I loved the company, I loved my uncle, I

got to see tons of Shakespeare, and I got to follow the company round. I fell in love with all the actors; I could help out backstage. And, also, this put me by way of thinking, “Are they original? What is originality?” What would it be to know all these things? And I think all the questions that shape what I do arose out of that company that I had been following since I was nine or ten. So I owe a great, great deal to my uncle. I also think it means that I always loved Shakespeare, and I loved Shakespeare before I knew he was supposed to be difficult or arcane or old-fashioned, because I loved performance first, with all the vigor and excitement and energy of that. So that experience also shaped my thought. What became awkward for me was that eventually, over time, I discovered that my uncle’s Original Shakespeare Company wasn’t as original as he thought! And this caused some tensions! *[laughs]* But I must say here, that though I had to disagree with him, I owe him everything. So that’s how I got into Shakespeare.

**Spiro:** Let’s talk about your work. You sometimes work collaboratively. You and Simon Palfrey on *Shakespeare in Parts*, and you edited *Shakespeare’s Theatres and the Effects of Performance* with Farah Karim-Cooper. And, as we know, in Shakespeare’s times, playwrights often worked collaboratively and the actors were very involved. How do you find collaborative scholarship? What is your process?

**Stern:** The process is different, depending on who you are collaborating with. You are individual, so when you’re collaborating, you are two individuals putting your individualities together. So, with Simon, our collaboration was a difficult one. I think he would agree with me on that. Possibly why the book we wrote has tension and urgency and energy is because it’s the product of the fact that we weren’t fully agreeing. We were rigorously reading one another’s bits and rewriting on top of them. We each did our own bits and wrote on top of the other’s, so everything was very peer-reviewed.

One of the things I hadn’t expected in writing with Simon is when we first exchanged passages, I sent a very, very vague, rough version of what I thought was the Introduction. And he sent me something and I started reading it, and I was kind of, “oh, he’s *also* written the Introduction. I’ve written the Introduction and he’s written the Introduction. That’s awkward. We should have said which bits we’d write.” And anyway as I’m reading his bit, I started to think, “Oh no, this is really more like chapter one ... and chapter two, and chapter six, and the conclusion.” I said, “I don’t know how to read this. What is it?” I rang Simon and asked, “I’ve sent you the introduction. What

have you sent me?” And he said, “The book.” And I realized, “Oh my! We don’t work the same way at all! Because I work sequentially and he writes a little typed bit and he then generates out of it, and expands it.” So we had to work out how to collaborate together. Our thoughts are radically different. We had a lot of disagreements. The book is maybe overlong because neither of us would give way on certain things. But as I said, I think what’s good about the book is the urgency that the tension and the disagreement, as well as the agreement, gave us.

I think other interesting things I’ve learned from that process of collaborating is, at one point I hoped that... Simon has a very vivid, very passionate style. I’m a careful writer. And I thought, “Maybe I’ll get some of Simon’s tremendousness into me.” But, of course you don’t, because you write the way you write. So I never got that. I also thought, “Maybe some version of my careful logic would go into Simon.” No. That’s not how we are. But what I did get, which has made think a lot about collaboration, is that everyone has verbal tics. Simon had some verbal tics. I’ve got *them*, I got those: because you’re inside someone else’s sentences, someone’s language structure itself, it becomes your own. That has made me think quite a lot about some of the many problems I find with stylometric analyses. One is that you don’t come out of collaboration unscathed. As I said, I now have some of Simon’s verbal tics, and naturally it goes the other way [i.e., he has some of mine]. Often you can completely tell which of us generated a sentence because of the content. But if it’s just a bland sentence, if you simply analyzed it for hallmarks, the hallmarks of someone’s style, and you went, “Okay, this has all the hallmarks of Simon’s style”? Maybe I wrote it! But that’s a very particular point of collaboration.

I have co-edited a book with Farah Karim-Cooper, and that was a very different process because we think in much more similar ways. So we weren’t trying to persuade the other – and it doesn’t have the persuasive edge of the book with Simon. In a way, Farah and I were just saving one another time. One of us would have more skills at one thing than another, but there wasn’t the tension. And maybe in that way we didn’t need one another in the way that Simon and I did: neither he nor I could separately have written the book that we wrote. It is the odd creature that is “us.” As I said, we’re not very similar. [*laughs*] I remember saying to Simon once, I said, “Ours is, this is like a troubled marriage.” And he said, “Yeah, it is like a troubled marriage, but look at the kid!” [*laughs*]

**Spiro:** Another question about your process. You have edited a lot: *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *The Jovial Crew*, and at least one or two other plays if I remember correctly.

**Stern:** Yes, *The Rivals*, *The Recruiting Officer*, *Country Wife*. My editing keeps up my interest in seventeenth/eighteenth century.

**Spiro:** So, what's your process as an editor? I know there can be very fraught questions about sources and variants and the list can go on. How do you navigate that as an editor?

**Stern:** I have a couple of answers to that, because I'm a general editor, General Editor of New Mermaids and Arden [Shakespeare] 4. Those questions are really questions for a general editor, because when you're an editor-editor, what you do is follow the guidelines: the guidelines say, "Don't do this, not in this edition." So, as an editor, you don't actually have much freedom of choice. You do what the guidelines set by the General Editor say. So, while I'm really interested in those questions, it's not so much a feature of the editing I've done, which I've done to-rule.

But in the position I'm now in, as General Editor of New Mermaids, which I have been for maybe the last ten years or so, that's an edition really for high school and undergraduates, so that has very particular questions that go with it. For editions of that kind, you're not rigorously collating. You are trying to do what it is that a current eighteen-year-old, say, wants. That's very different from what an eighteen-year-old wanted twenty years ago. And we are slowly rethinking: How much should we have companion websites? We're just at the starting point of thinking about this. So one thing is, how to use the internet as part of the editorial process. And another thing, and again I'm thinking New Mermaids, is that we're trying to have it as a rule that anything you say about context, source, background, or whatever, should have a piece of close reading that illustrates how you can think about the text differently in the light of that additional piece of information. Because a lot of editions just give information because they do, and it just sits there. Particularly sources, and even things like theater history, where they say "So, in the eighteenth century, they did it with big wigs." And you're thinking, "But why does anyone want to know that? *Make me* want to know it." So, anyway, we've been having these thoughts at New Mermaids, but I think where it's really becoming crucial is that I'm one of the three General Editors of Arden Shakespeare 4, the next iteration of Arden, and Arden is a very particular, a very important thing. As far as scholarship in the Shakespeare community goes, it's a benchmark, and we've got to rethink Arden from scratch,

because the next Arden will have to be born digital. It may also be published in books but the *thought* has to be digital first.

**Spiro:** The Arden Shakespeare editions have just gotten larger and larger.

**Stern:** They've got larger and larger, and when you're thinking of commissioning *now* for things that will come out... the first will come out in ten-plus years' time, and you're thinking of books coming out in twenty years' time, thirty years' time: we're talking about a different world. Now it's really extraordinarily difficult, truly, to have the born-digital thought, and we're still working it out. Amongst the difficulties are these: in a book edition, you can have as many verbal notes as you can fit on a page, whilst still also having some text on a page. So that gives you a natural limit to the length of any note. If you're online, you could have twenty-eight pages, "pages" as it were, of notes; you could name every Fool player ever; you could have a picture of every noun: "And here it is in a museum; and here's another version of it. And now here's Laurence Olivier fighting with it. And now here's the OED definition of it. And now here's every EEBO book that's ever mentioned it. And here's every JSTOR article that refers to it ..." And now you've got an archive of the play. You haven't got a readable text. So we're still trying to work out how to tell editors – how to create the guidelines which tell editors – what *not* to supply when they can supply everything, when they're no longer limited to the word or the length of the page. So, as I said, actually I've come up with more questions than answers, that's because we're still slowly working through what the answers to these things can be. But editing is going to be very different when you're not thinking of text as printed word and note as printed word, and once you allow other things in: images, sounds, which are of course as much part of plays as the physical words... that really, deeply changes the thought. And, as I say, we're slowly working through what that is, and the most difficult thing is not how to get hold of all this amazing information, but how to tell editors how *not* to get hold of too much amazing information. So editing, one of the major jobs of a future editor... I think editors of the past were trying to get as much as they could in books. Editors of the future, the job will be cutting down all the information, giving just the one crucial thing that explains it all.

**Spiro:** Culling, filtering.

**Stern:** Yes, it's going to be an entirely different job.

**Spiro:** At the moment there are quite a lot of people here at Oxford who do very interesting work on Shakespeare. In the recent past, it seemed like the groundbreaking work was being done, for example, at Liverpool or Berkeley, but now it looks like Oxford has become the best place to go for the study of Shakespeare. I'm curious: Is there an "Oxford School?" Is there a way that you think of yourself as part of something? Or is it just that you happen to have a lot of people here?

**Stern:** I should say that I have just resigned from Oxford, so I'm moving to Royal Holloway: I will be part of the University of London, Royal Holloway. But to answer your question: truly, we happen to have a lot of people. It would be better if there were a different answer. But the actual structure is we all have our colleges, we teach in our colleges, we eat in our colleges, we socialize in our colleges, we have a college-based life – not a Faculty-based life. So we joke that we Oxford Shakespeareans meet one another at the SAA [Shakespeare Association of America]. Some of us are independently friends, but we don't share papers, we don't give papers to one another, we don't hang around in a room discussing the future of things. So it is a bit of a coincidence, but I have some thoughts.

I don't think there is an "Oxford School of thought." What I think might be more the case is that England, and Oxford, has become "modish." England was never such a "theory" place as America was. And one reason for that is we're a small country, we've got a lot of rare books, and I think in some way theory filled a gap for very good scholars, who were in Kansas, say, and they couldn't read a rare book. And theory gave them a series of things they could do with a Penguin Classic. Now, the internet has given rare books to everyone, roughly, with EEBO and ECCO and more manuscripts are getting out there, and that has changed the shape of scholarship generally. And I think in Oxford and Cambridge, we had always taught bibliography, paleography (in the Master's courses the basic skills are those) which had been outmoded elsewhere in the 80s and 90s, and people weren't doing them. But Oxford and Cambridge had been teaching those things, and doing them for years, though they weren't where the *Zeitgeist* was. But the stuff we're producing, which arises out of the way we were taught and the way we do teach, is currently the "in" thing. Which makes Oxford "in." But I wonder if that isn't just lucky, a little bit.

So the sort of things we do, which are now being done in a sort of post-theory enlightened way, are where the field now is a bit. And I think it maybe helps that at Oxford, too, some of the people we're talking about, Laurie Maguire, Emma Smith, me ... with more women, there's maybe less

antler-clashing. I mean, the men are still doing that, but with women there's some more generosity, receptivity, and the flavor of scholarship is a little bit different. So maybe another advantage is that Oxford has so many good women. But I will be very intrigued to hear what my colleagues say.

**Spiro:** Building on that, the return to more “scholarly” work, the use of archival materials, there has been a return to studying the original dramatic conditions. Just as you were saying about saying to your uncle, “That’s not the original way,” there is this strong attention to, “What was it like when the plays were very first performed, the words were very first heard? What role did the actors play, and the publishers, and the producers, and the audience?” What’s curious is that this is happening at the very same time that, performance-wise, to do what is called an “original” production is one choice among many others. Now it’s standard in some theater companies to set the play in a kind of no-place, or in a particular historical period that is not related to the play – the Old West, or feudal Japan, or the present day. And there are more serious questions about diverse casting. This seems to be a disjunct between where the scholarship goes, which is so much towards “What was it like in 1597, in the original production? What did they know? How does it help us to know what they know?” That’s my question: How does it help us to think about what they knew, what they first heard, how it was, at those first performances?

**Stern:** Let me just, before I answer that question, say, I think if you love Bach – let’s say you love Bach, and you love the B Minor Mass, and you want as many recordings of the B Minor Mass as possible. In at least one of them, you want original instruments, to know how it might actually have sounded: everything wooden, everything soft. And you’ll *also* want a bright, sharp performance, modern instruments, extremely modern abilities, an exciting contemporary conductor: you want both. And you want all the in-between ones as well. Same with theater.

So *I* think it’s incredibly important to think about the actual context for which the plays were written. You want to understand, what were the circumstances that made Shakespeare write in the way he did? What were the things he was bearing in mind? That has to be one of the important questions. That can also help you teach it to a student now, a student who will go, “Well, this seems alien.” And you go, “Not if you understand, that what an actor would have been given is this.” So, (A), understanding then helps you understand Shakespeare; (B), understanding then helps you understand now; but (C), understanding “then” doesn’t mean that “then” is better than “now,” and that that is how you should do everything. It’s more of a groundwork; it’s “I’m not

sure you're fully understanding Shakespeare if you're not understanding Shakespeare's context." The context somehow brought Shakespeare out, and he brought the context out. So I think context is really important.

And you are also right in what you say that we have a lot of concept-led productions these days. Ever since the rise of the director, in the Victorian period onwards, once you have a director, a director wants to have a concept that shows off him or her, the director. The director's job is not simply making the words work as best they can. It's putting something onto them that shows that person, the director. So there is an issue with all concept-led productions that they set up a rivalry between Shakespeare and themselves. A modern production is not a director just working to bring out Shakespeare. It's a director seeing how they can twist the Shakespeare to be about [e.g.,] Iraq. And I have a lot of time for that. It does bring out certain things. But also, there's a bit of me that thinks, "What a shame it's no one's job just to 'do' a play. What a shame that that would seem old-fashioned and 'museum theater,' or giving up." So I'm also sad about that.

I also think, though, we do additionally have a particular interest in "then," even in the modern theater. We built the Globe in 1997. We've just built the Sam Wanamaker. In Staunton, Virginia, you've got the Blackfriars Theater. You've got lots of little companies who put on plays from "actors' parts," which is one of the things that I write about, and that Simon writes about, actors' parts. They do that, a little bit because they're trying to recover something more about context that might make the plays perform a slightly different way. And, they're also doing it to save money because they don't have to pay for a director. Still, there isn't *not* an interest in original performance. There's an original performance school, and there's a director's school, and I think as teachers as well as academics, we need to negotiate between the two.

But, to return to why is it important, I find context very resonant. It helps me understand Shakespeare. I also think it's very teachable. If a student gets a sense of what early modern London was like, what a theater was like, what being an actor was like, now these things that seemed recondite and complicated and weird, now they have a logic for it. And once you have a logic for something, you can like it, and not be frightened by it.

**Spiro:** It seems to me that there is a somewhat separate conversation about relevance. "We're setting *Coriolanus* in Iraq." It's a way of answering the relevance question.



**Stern:** But that's patronizing to Shakespeare. That suggests that he's not relevant unless you add something that was never there to *make* it relevant!

**Spiro:** Right, and it also frustrates what you're talking about. It's very useful for a student to try to think like somebody else, to go somewhere else and take on other ideas and assumptions.

**Stern:** Which is what literature does, after all.

**Spiro:** Another thing that your work in particular brings out is how much theater is a collaborative enterprise. How much what we think of as Shakespeare's writing is the product of him, not just working with his partners and theatrical collaborators, but also responding to the audience and the censors and the ideas in the air. And not to fall too deeply into questions of authorial intention, but what does this do our conception of these plays being by Shakespeare? There is this sense that the study of original theatrical conditions is taking Shakespeare off a pedestal and makes him into some sort of antenna.

**Stern:** Well, you're not properly appreciating Shakespeare if you have to put him on a phony pedestal and you feel threatened by actual information about how things were. [*laughs*] That does him no good service. I think, yes, there was an awful lot of collaboration in the theater of the time. That doesn't stop him being the author of what he was author of. He was a very great author, but you can only understand both how great he was and also what his processes were by understanding how things were then. And that helps you see why he thought the way he did, why he organized his plays the way he did. And, it also helps you see that his process wasn't uniquely other from the process of anyone else.

I hate this "lone genius" thing because, as I say, I find it patronizing and disgraceful to the person who did what everyone else did *better*. [*laughs*] So I think, understand him, understand his contemporaries, and I sometimes feel very sorry for incredibly great writers like Fletcher who've been rather forgotten because of Shakespeare. Our balance is an imbalance. We have imbalanced things. This is not to denigrate Shakespeare in any way. He deserves all the attention we give him, but we have done so at the expense of his period and at the expense of other great writers. And that's why I'm excited by the sort of work that Bart [van Es] is doing, which brings back the importance of other writers. Shakespeare was highly influenced by other writers and he went on to influence other writers and that's part of the amazing benefit for us as well, as academics, what

we do. We collaborate and influence one another; we influence our students; they influence us. No one's just alone in some ivory tower, unshaped by all the events happening round them, and the world in which they live. And how outrageous to say that that is the case with, of all people, Shakespeare.

**Spiro:** What is it that Shakespeare's audience knew that is so important for us to know? I have been to productions where the program notes have to prepare the audience for, for example, the rhetoric games and theological questions that are dead to us. I have heard some directors say that all that stuff should be cut because it means nothing to the contemporary audience. What is it that we don't know that we should know?

**Stern:** One thing to say is, the balance of knowledge was different then, between then and now. For one thing, here is Shakespeare coining a lot of words. So there are a lot of his words that are *familiar* to us that would be unfamiliar to his audience. So we shouldn't think they were finding Shakespeare easier than we are finding Shakespeare. There are lots of things that we find easy that they were finding difficult.

But I think the difference there is that because years and years of teaching Shakespeare has made current audiences think that you should go to Shakespeare like you're going to church, like it's a liturgy. "You don't understand it but *it's very important.*" That is a very different attitude for an early modern audience going along and when they didn't understand a word, they will have gone, "Fantastic! A new word!" because language was expanding all the time. "Let me get out my table-book, let me note the new word down. I can't wait to go home and use the new word! My neighbor just won't know what I'm saying because I've used this fantastic new word!" So, I think they would have encountered some of the difficulties we do with understanding it, but I think for them, a new word would have been an exciting present, whereas for us, we're inclined to say, "No, I give up now. I just didn't understand that sentence." So, I think there's an attitude difference, that in some ways we're having similar experiences but we're feeling about them differently.

And, as I say, one of the big problems here is the fact that Shakespeare has come to be a sort of badge of something that's nothing to do with Shakespeare. You know, Shakespeare was funny and bawdy and lyrical and gorgeous and irreverent. We've got a mental-deadpan Shakespeare that's just sort of, [*deepens voice*] "good." And people go not to be entertained, not expecting a good

time, but expecting and feeling, “I’ll be ennobled because I’ve seen a Shakespeare play.” So, I’d love to get at that attitude and tear it apart. And that can happen sometimes with really good productions, where people are kind of, “You know, I actually *did* laugh!” Or, “I actually felt moved!” Yes, of course you felt moved, because it’s the story of a father making a terrible mistake and his youngest daughter dying, of course you’re moved!

Back to your question, there are all kinds of things they knew that we don’t know and vice-versa. They were very smelly and all sorts of things. [*laughs*] They were much nearer to their bodily functions in some ways than we are. They were much nearer to death than we are. Most people will have seen death, laid out a loved, dead person. Smelled death. They were much nearer to God than we are, a lot of them. Their experience of life was... more war, they’re much nearer to illness. Death haunted every single person. If you were a woman, how likely were you to die in childbirth? The second you’re pregnant, you’ve got a bomb inside yourself. It’s very likely you are going to die giving birth in incredible agony, or afterwards from some kind of blood poisoning. It’s so likely. That must have made impregnating your wife feel rather different, particularly if you loved her. You could die of toothache; you could die of flu. I think maybe every moment was more precious, was more lived. In the same way, a play had better be good, because you might be dead next week! Who knows? You don’t want to have wasted those hours. So, I think maybe they felt life a bit differently.

And this is different from, of course, more formal issues: yes, they taught rhetoric at school. Word-play would have been different. But actually, a lot of Shakespeare’s word-play, a lot of it is puns. We still love puns. It’s just that his puns aren’t always our puns. So a pun between “sheep” and “ship” doesn’t work so well for us because we say them in different ways, and wouldn’t confuse these words. But, we still find puns hilarious. Half our humor is still pun-based. So I think we should remember the differences but also remember the similarities between that audience and our audience.

I think when you look at Shakespeare, one of the things is, he’s very interested in the underdog: the black person, the Jewish person, the bastard, the woman. He’s interested in all of those, and I think to him, they were a bit interchangeable. Those things, the underdog, the Other, they can be just as smart, as feisty, as witty, as rhetorically sophisticated, as deep, as an allegory. He has that interest. He is confronting the audience with some of its biases, and asking it to think through

them. We still have a lot of those biases. Not always about the same things, though sometimes... look how racist it turns out England is! We've got the same biases!

**Spiro:** People have been sharing on social media the passage from *Sir Thomas More* about refugees.

**Stern:** So much of Shakespeare suddenly becomes... Shakespeare is being invoked all the time as our country falls apart. "Oh look, we're stabbing each other in the back!" Just the day before, when [Michael] Gove stabbed Boris Johnson in the back and the papers were going, "*Et tu, Brute?*" They can't stop! Cameron as an "over-reacher." It is interesting, when something big happens politically and we want to reach out, we say "What's the vocabulary, what's the context for describing this? This is extraordinary, this is huge, this is epic, this is *tragic!* Where do we look but the Bard to explain this?" It's been happening all through... It would be fascinating to go through the newspapers of the last week – we're one week into the horrors of Brexit – to go through the newspapers and find how often Shakespeare has been invoked.

**Spiro:** On every side.

**Stern:** On every side, yes. As the Labour Party also falls apart, yes.

**Spiro:** It reminds me of 2008, when Barack Obama was first running for President, and he had to distance himself from his former pastor, Rev. Jeremiah Wright. At first he tried to explain their relationship, but as Wright became more embarrassing, Obama had to sever ties with him. A friend of mine sent me an article about it with the subject-heading, "I know thee not, old man."

**Stern:** Yes!

**Spiro:** You had mentioned before to me that you think Brexit is going to have serious implications for higher education, for the study of literature.

**Stern:** Yes, huge. There are practical ones, there are intellectual ones. Practical ones: for one thing, our economy is now terrible.

**Spiro:** This is my first experience in England with a favorable exchange-rate.

**Stern:** Yes, you're a lucky guy! So, in universities that are not Oxford and Cambridge, it's going to be way more expensive for academics to travel to Europe or the States, so they're not going to be as present in conferences unless they've got private wealth. So, just, England will be a little more out of the game because it won't have that kind of money. That's a practical thing. Another massive practical thing: universities here got a lot of money out of Europe. A lot of grant money. So we won't have that money, and we won't have those European collaborations that were, I mean... Talk about context: in Europe, they've got a lot of early modern documents that we don't have that will help us to understand ours, and ours can help them understand theirs. So all those collaborations you were hoping to have, looking at the Spanish theatrical documents and so forth, those things aren't going to happen. So, again, practical things.

But, more, the flow of people back and forth between continental Europe and here, with all their rich ideas, their own different contexts and backgrounds. You can't travel into the past but you can travel into other places, and they get you into another way of thinking. There will be less of that. There will be fewer students, fewer academics from Europe, maybe. Perhaps you're going to need visas to travel to these places. We're only a week in. We know it's absolutely terrible, really, really bad, for academia across the world. We can only start to think of how specifically bad it is in certain ways, but I think basically the "Little England" atmosphere takes us back to Shakespeare, of course. The "sceptered isle" idea of England in a global economy, and an intellectual economy as well as financial economy, is a terrible idea. All that is, supposedly, to put the "Great" back into Britain. But old Great Britain was a vicious, colonialist power. We should never want to be that again. We also don't have that kind of money, the money we had when we were an empire. So the people who were voting for Brexit were voting for some kind of notional Britain that they've got off *Downton Abbey* or something. It never existed for everyone. It only ever existed for posh people, and it was repulsive when it was Victorian and weird. This is just a rant now, but I think it's really bad for international exchange on every level, financially, intellectually, because it is limiting things. And at a point when Shakespeare studies... another reason, maybe, why Oxford has become more prominent is because we are more visible in America. We're at SAA. We see all the Americans, they see us, once a year. If that becomes less the case, then so does that level of exchange. And then whoever can't go to those conferences can't feel where the field now is.

**Spiro:** What trends in Shakespeare and early modern studies do you find particularly promising or interesting?

**Stern:** I'm interested in the material culture trend. But again, I would be. It's a different way of thinking about context. I'm very interested in "things," books, material culture. Another trend that is bound to happen and maybe is happening a bit is that for a long time ... you can see where we now are is a reaction to the Angry Guy Marxists before us. You can see how. Everyone was angry with literature, and now we're very practical, very sensible, scholarly about literature. I think there's been a long time since we had some positive passion about literature. We haven't done "appreciation" for a long time. I'm sure there will be a movement that's kind of aesthetic, appreciative, but finds a way of doing that that's intellectualized in some way. In a way I think our kind of scholarship, actually, where you find context and then you close-read the literature in the context, is a kind of close reading hidden away as "stuff." But I think there's bound to be a kind of new aesthetics, a new appreciation of some kind in the future. I feel like it's time for that. We all actually like the literature and we shouldn't be ashamed to say so.

**Spiro:** I remember in graduate school we used to confess that we actually loved it and we weren't supposed to.

**Stern:** You weren't supposed to. You were supposed to spot its tricks. "I see what the book is trying to do to me."

**Spiro:** Its "hidden agenda." And you were saying that Shakespeare is interested in the underdog. I remember hearing that he doesn't take the underdog's side enough. He's a symptom of the way we look at the Other. You see not necessarily sympathy but interest.

**Stern:** He's interested in it. He is not a solver of problems. He is a displayer of problems. "Here you are. Then you can go off and think about it." None of his plays solve. Every single conversation you have with a student about a comedy is along the lines of "Why is there something a bit bleak about the end of this comedy?" All the comic marriages are all kind of, [*shrugging*] "I don't know! I'm not so sure!" They're all think-pieces that he doesn't solve, but he puts you in the way of thinking about these things: now you've got to have a *position* in the light of what you've seen. You're going to have a discussion where you're going to say, "Should the Friar [in *Measure for Measure*] have proposed to Isabella?" Now we must think about religion, we must think about

ruling countries, we must think about rejecting sexuality and becoming nuns, we must think about love of your brother versus religion. It's a think-piece. He doesn't come up with any solutions. He just comes up with a load of problems for you to analyze. I think that's one of the things he's brilliant at. But anyone who reckons they've solved Shakespeare – or that Shakespeare is solving things – is being simplistic about Shakespeare.