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Interview with Professor Tiffany Stern (Professor of Shakespeare and Early Modern Drama at The Shakespeare Institute, University of Birmingham, UK)

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Conducted electronically by Professor Min-Hua Wu (吳敏華, Professor and Chair, Department of English, National Chengchi University and President, Taiwan Shakespeare Association) from February to April 2026, this interview is prepared as a scholarly dialogue in anticipation of the 2026 Wenshan × Taiwan Shakespeare Association International Conference, to be held on 29 November 2026 at National Chengchi University.

I. Intellectual Formation and Scholarly Trajectory

MHW Your work on early modern playbooks, rehearsal practices, and theatrical ephemera has fundamentally reshaped how scholars understand Shakespeare—not as a static authorial figure, but as a practitioner embedded in the material conditions of theatrical production. Looking back, what first drew you to these marginal yet revealing archives of early modern drama?

TS I was first drawn to questions about the material conditions that shaped Shakespeare's work through conversations with my uncle Patrick Tucker. He was a director and ran a company called The Original Shakespeare Company, which aimed to put on plays in the way Shakespeare had. One day, when I was an undergraduate, my uncle phoned me and asked if I could find out how actors had rehearsed in Shakespeare's day. I told him that I would go to the library and ring him that evening with the answer. Ten years later, I completed my doctorate on historic rehearsal practices! Seeing the Original Shakespeare Company perform, and watching the choices that the actors made, encouraged by the text, taught me to think about the practicalities of performance. I have been exploring such issues ever since.

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MHW Much of your scholarship challenges the long-standing assumption that Shakespeare's plays reached audiences in stable, finished forms. How did your early archival discoveries prompt you to rethink the ontology of the early modern playtext?

TS I started by being interested in Shakespeare texts that existed in two or more different printed forms, like *Romeo and Juliet, King Lear, Othello, Hamlet* and others. It was clear that these texts had been revised and changed—but when? by whom? Were all of them equally by "Shakespeare"? When I started finding performance documents in the archives (not by Shakespeare himself, alas, but by other authors of the period), it became clear to me that the very process of putting on a play led to many different manuscripts, and that a play always simultaneously existed in lots of forms, not all of which contained the same material: there was the text the author wrote; a prompter's version marked up for performance; little texts for actors containing just their lines and brief cues ("actors' parts"); prologues, epilogues, songs, letters, which were on separate papers and were often lost and changed. Later still, there might be a different manuscript again, written up in neat for publication—but, if published, that text might then itself become a prompter's book and have manuscript revisions added to it by the author or a reviser, plus parts, songs and so forth. Once I had gathered how many different bits of paper constituted "a play," I realized that the printed texts we had were just snapshots in the ever-changing life of a play.

MHW Your research is often described as transforming "what counts as evidence" in Shakespeare studies. Do you see this methodological shift as a conscious intervention, or did it emerge organically from sustained archival work?

TS I did not set out to find new evidence or create a methodological shift. Rather, I had slightly different questions from the ones other people were asking, and new evidence emerged in the light of them. For instance, everyone had been wondering "how were Shakespeare's plays performed"? But the different question—the question I had inherited from my uncle—"how were Shakespeare's plays rehearsed?" led me to new and other kinds of evidence. Ever since then, whenever I have set out on a research project, I

have always tried to ask the question that is behind or to the side of the one that other people are asking and explore the answer to that.

II. Shakespeare, Ballads, and Popular Culture

MHW In your influential work on Shakespeare and ballads, you illuminate the playwright's deep engagement with popular song culture. How does attending to ballads alter our understanding of Shakespeare's relationship with his audiences?

TS We often imagine that Shakespeare's audience was similar to an audience today: silent and reverential and sitting in the dark attending plays with rapt attention. Shakespeare's audience, though, were loud, might well be standing, were seeing performances in daylight and, often, with broadsheet ballads in their hands. These ballads were big printed papers containing the words of songs. As there were ballad sellers around the theatres, singing and promoting the songs in the play to come, or that told the story of the play to come, I realized that ballads were theatrical merchandise that also affected the way one understood the plays themselves. When Shakespeare plays contained ballads, we might say, in contemporary marketing terms, that he was product placing them! But he was also acknowledging the audience who had bought (or would go out and buy) the ballads: they could sing along, if encouraged, and could read the full narrative of a song only partially sung in a play. That meant that ballads were a very particular kind of musical paratext. It also meant that the relationship Shakespeare had with some of the audience (the literate, ballad-buying ones) was closer than with others.

MHW Ballads were ephemeral, performative, and often disposable objects. What methodological challenges arise when scholars attempt to reconstruct such transient cultural forms, and how might these challenges productively reshape literary history?

TS The story behind ballads reveals how, though often lost now (and therefore viewed as ephemeral), they were ever-present in the early modern period. In Shakespeare's time, there were ballads on the walls of alehouses, dairies (they set a good rhythm for milking), and domestic houses. A ballad

no longer extant now, for instance, might have been someone's wall decoration for twenty years. So they were transient, but in their own time did not seem ephemeral precisely. I faced, though, two big practical challenges for my work: what to do about lost ballads, and how to date extant ballads. As it turned out, the text of lost ballads—though not the actual printed papers—was sometimes recorded inside people's notebooks, commonplace books, or even in legal accounts; I was able to "get back" a few unknown ballads. Dating extant ballads was harder though. One could often date when a surviving ballad was printed, but not when it had first been written or sung, because a ballad's extant text may date from decades after the lyrics first came about. I had to find out when the ballad was first mentioned in other texts, which was sometimes years before the date of the surviving text. These findings do, though, reshape literary history because they give a sense of the "daily" literature with which people engaged, the tunes they heard, the performances they encountered, the catch phrases they had. Ballads were a context for plays, and sometimes an advertisement for them, and sometimes a source; literary history has to be expanded to accommodate them.

MHW Do you think Shakespeare's engagement with ballads complicates the conventional divide between "high" literary culture and "low" popular entertainment in early modern England?

TS I do! Realizing how closely Shakespeare worked with ballads, putatively a "low" form of literature, is a reminder that he was himself popular and a populist. His brilliance has, over time, encouraged us to analyze his plays as high culture, but ballads help remind us that his plays, and their associations and linked texts, were popular artforms. It should be added here that Shakespeare was himself both a ballad promoter and ballad writer (and, as the plays make clear, an avid ballad fan and collector). Ballads were part of Shakespeare's world.

III. Rehearsal, Performance, and Theatrical Temporality

MHW Your research has foregrounded the role of rehearsal, improvisation, and contingency in early modern performance. How does this emphasis challenge text-centered approaches to Shakespeare?

TS My research shows something that is in a way obvious: that text and performance are not the same. But whereas we tend to favor musical performance over, say, a musical score—we long to hear someone play music magnificently—we often shy away from performed plays and sometimes treat them as though they are less than, rather than more than, what is on the page. I hope that placing the performance aspect of texts to the forefront gives us new materials *and* new ways to analyze them—and thus gives us even more to think about!

MHW Early modern theatre operated under intense time pressure and economic constraint. How did these conditions shape dramatic form, characterization, and audience experience?

TS Those are big (excellent) questions. Plays are written for the way that they will be rehearsed, as well as the way they will be performed. Shakespeare's plays were written anticipating limited time and money for rehearsal. They were intended to be disseminated, learned, and staged in swift succession. To bring this about, plays were divided into bits and given to actors as separate "parts" (texts that contained the speeches and cues of the character the actor was to play; not the whole play), to be committed to memory alone at home. After what was often only a single rehearsal or partial rehearsal, the play could be mounted. If one takes a full Shakespeare play and divides it into parts, recreating the information an actor might have had, one can see all sorts of information about characterization and rhetorical habit that is hidden when reading the whole play. A part's changes from prose to verse, from high to low language, from questions to answers, etc., are actor-instructions that also determine the complexity and texture of the whole play. The audience experience of seeing plays learned in this fashion will have been different too. With minimal group rehearsal, productions will not have had the film-like perfection they sometimes do these days and will have needed more prompting. But that will have underlined the "live" qualities of performance; they will have been urgent, alert, frantic, and exciting because they were always in danger of failing.

MHW What implications does your work on rehearsal practices have for contemporary Shakespeare performance and pedagogy?

TS For contemporary performance I think it offers a different (and cheaper) way of putting on plays. Giving actors separate parts and asking them to learn those parts at home saves money on rehearsal and means that a director or a governing concept are both unnecessary. In pedagogical terms, it can be very helpful to break plays into their textual components in the way the company would have done in Shakespeare's time. That gives us a series of texts to analyze, such as actors' parts, scrolls, prologues, and songs. Asking classes to interpret early modern documents is appealing to them, and they often do not realize that they are doing high-level close-reading as a result!

IV. Editing, Archives, and Scholarly Responsibility

MHW As an editor and archival scholar, how do you navigate the tension between making early modern materials accessible to modern readers and preserving their historical strangeness?

TS Early modern texts, if framed carefully, and explained, are exciting because strange (rather than scary because strange). In my criticism, therefore, I often keep old spelling but try to contextualize it, and, if I can, show pictures to illustrate how fascinating it is. When editing, though, I make different choices. I have been in my time General Editor for New Mermaids (a play series) and Editor for Norton (an anthology) and am currently General Editor of Arden Shakespeare Fourth Series. All those series are modern-spelling; but for them, I try to direct the reader to archival documents online and, again, add pictures when I can.

MHW What ethical responsibilities do Shakespeare editors bear when reconstructing texts that were themselves products of collaboration, revision, and loss?

TS Editors can usefully call attention to the many collaborators who worked even on single authored texts: the prompter, the actors, the musicians, the tiremen (men who helped in the dressing rooms) in the playhouse; the compositors (type setters), as well as the people who inked and printed the pages in the printing house. Often those unacknowledged collaborators are "in" the text in some way, and it is good to celebrate that fact. Then there is the

fact that many plays were collaborative, and many others adapted: it is exciting to think of the range of authors involved in some well-known plays. I think we should call attention to these people, while also reminding readers of the many other people whose contributions are invisible.

MHW How might editorial practice benefit from closer dialogue with performance studies and book history?

TS Part of what I am doing with Arden Shakespeare Fourth Series is trying to bridge those gaps and to encourage my fellow editors to think deeply about the way performance and printing have shaped their texts. I am thinking of writing a book for play editors on "ways of looking" at early modern texts with page and stage to the forefront but will only have time to do that when I have finished my own Arden edition!

V. Academic Leadership and The Shakespeare Institute

MHW As Deputy Director of the Shakespeare Institute at Stratford-upon-Avon, how do you envision the Institute's role in shaping the future of global Shakespeare studies?

TS Global Shakespeare studies are a source of excitement and inspiration to everyone at The Shakespeare Institute. Colleagues who work on adaptation or editing (collectively, that is all of us) are fascinated by the way that Shakespeare is translated, performed and fused with other cultures, and how scholars in other countries have analyzed particular passages. We all teach an MA course called "Shakespeare's World/The World's Shakespeare" which aims to explore different aspects of global Shakespeare. We hope to continue shaping the future of global Shakespeare studies on a personal level too, by continuing to welcome students from around the globe to study with us and continuing to invite academics from other countries. Our International Shakespeare Conference gives us an opportunity, every two years, to have scholars from around the world visit us and share what they are currently working on, and we also run the "Shakespeare Beyond Borders Alliance" which aims to bring together willing participants in sharing Shakespeare from across the globe.

MHW What strategies have you found most effective in fostering dialogue between archival scholarship, performance practice, and international research communities?

TS For me, the most effective way of fostering dialogue is just that: having actual dialogue. Creating opportunities for international experts to exchange ideas—by visiting one another's countries (thank you, Kevin, for creating one such wonderful opportunity),[1] holding conferences, as well as giving Zoom talks and exchanges—is one way to help different parts of our discipline, and different experts within it, to have opportunities to talk with one another. Another way is to set up collaborative spaces that share findings and make them more accessible to everyone. Various websites, like A.S.I.A., are providing fruitful ways for seeing productions from other countries, for instance (that site has a translation feature, which makes productions available to us in ways they had not been before); we, in turn, have sites which make our productions internationally available, including Arden's Drama Online.

MHW How does The Shakespeare Institute balance its historical legacy with the need to remain intellectually innovative and globally engaged?

TS The Shakespeare Institute is lucky enough to be able to attract students from many different countries (we have current students from India, Japan, China, South Africa, the US, and across Europe, but none, sadly, from Taiwan at present—please change that by joining us!).[2] We teach the students, obviously, but they do also teach us, and alert us to the scholars and performances of their home countries, so our historical legacy and global issues are intermingled from the start. We also hold the biennial International Shakespeare Conference, mentioned above, in our historic institution; this is an invitation-only conference for global experts. You are one, Kevin, and we have been delighted to have you join us. That conference also keeps us abreast

[1] "Kevin Wu" is the interviewer's alternative English name; his official name is Min-Hua Wu.

[2] To the best of the interviewer's knowledge, at least two Taiwanese scholars have earned PhD degrees in Shakespeare and early modern drama studies from The Shakespeare Institute in the UK. Associate Professor Alan Ying-nan Lin (林瑛南) retired from the Department of English at National Taiwan Normal University, while Associate Professor Shelly Hsin-yi Hsieh (謝心怡) currently teaches in the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures at National Chung Hsing University. Both have made significant contributions to Shakespearean and early modern drama studies in Taiwan. The importance and influence of The Shakespeare Institute can hardly be overstated.

of the newest moves in global scholarship. Additionally, we foster special relationships with universities across the globe that have strong Shakespeare programs, and we try to organize special events and, where possible, support student exchanges, as we do in our connection with Waseda University in Japan and Nanjing University in China. We would be delighted to foster more such exchanges.

VI. Global Shakespeare and International Collaboration

MHW From your perspective, how has the rise of global Shakespeare studies transformed British academic approaches to early modern drama?

TS The rise of global Shakespeare studies has supplemented, enriched, and challenged British academic approaches. Seeing ways that Shakespeare's texts can be embedded in other cultures has taught us to avoid parochialism or nationalism when addressing Shakespeare, and to prize his works as themselves a kind of outreach. We have also seen how other cultures have learned to be subversive through the medium of Shakespeare: Shakespeare productions and discussion sometimes are ways of expressing and exploring issues that cannot be articulated directly. That has taught us—and academics in the US particularly—how to encode dissent or explore new possibilities through Shakespeare. So global Shakespeare studies are transforming our approaches in stated and unstated ways.

MHW What kinds of international collaborations do you see as most vital for the next generation of Shakespeare scholarship?

TS There are all kinds of international collaborations that will be important for the future of Shakespeare scholarship—some academic, and some on the stage. Academically, we all need one another in a world that is ever more threatening and difficult. There are, thanks to the internet, ever more broad and exciting ways in which we can all collaborate, not just in conferences, but in general. At The Shakespeare Institute we sometimes have international scholars Zoom in, for instance, and I would hope to do more of that; for a while we were running joint seminars with National University of Singapore, though the time-difference made that tricky. In performance terms, great

collaborative projects, international in inception, have made some productions widely available—I am thinking again of A.S.I.A.; more such would be welcome. We are all stronger when united, and I also think that intellectual and cultural collaboration is one way in which to counter world crises that sometimes try to tear us apart.

MHW How can institutions such as The Shakespeare Institute support scholars working on Shakespeare in non-European contexts without subsuming their work under Anglophone paradigms?

TS Of the eight permanent academics at The Shakespeare Institute, one is a native Japanese speaker, and one a native Greek speaker, and our students are native speakers of a range of languages—which I hope makes us not linguistically insular. We are also all on the boards of a range of journals and series, many of which are international and hold the various outward-looking events detailed above, like the ISC (International Shakespeare Conference) and Shakespeare Beyond Borders. Sometimes we are lucky enough to have exchanges such as the one that I will have in Taiwan (and for which thank you so much again).[3] The support and promote non-European scholarship. The second part of the question is tricky, though. My hope is that Anglophone and non-Anglophone paradigms are not essentially at odds with one another, because the ultimate paradigm for us all is the work of Shakespeare.

VII. Reflections and Advice

MHW Looking back on your career, what intellectual risks proved most rewarding in your scholarly development?

TS I do not tend to follow the crowd: as above, I like to ask the question that is to the side of the ones that everyone else is asking. That can be risky, as it can look perverse, or—in that it does not always accept current thought-confrontational. That is also where the rewards have been, because that is how

[3] Professor Tiffany Stern was invited by the interviewer to serve as one of the two keynote speakers at the 2026 Wenshan × TSA International Conference (November 29, 2026). Her visit to Taiwan will be supported by an NSTC short-term visiting grant. During her stay, she will deliver lectures on Shakespeare and early modern drama at National Chengchi University, National Taiwan University, Feng Chia University, and National Changhua University of Education.

I have made new findings. I have always enjoyed reading detective novels, and setting out like a "cold case detective" to solve past mysteries by exploring them in different ways has always been rewarding for me.

MHW What advice would you offer early-career scholars who wish to combine archival rigor with methodological innovation?

TS I would say: do not start with a theory, and do not start by thinking you know what you will find. Either of those will hamper you with agendas. Instead, have (new) questions, let the questions lead to discoveries, and let the discoveries dictate to you. The result will be new findings and methodological innovation can arise from that.

MHW Finally, how do you hope Shakespeare studies will change over the next decade and century, both institutionally and intellectually?

TS I think a lot of Shakespeare and other scholarship is angry and troubled currently, because the world is. For the last decade or so, we have been looking at Shakespeare with historical injustice—to women, LGBTQA+ people, people of color, minorities—in mind. That can lead our scholarship to be enraged by Shakespeare's legacy and sometimes by Shakespeare himself. Recent important but furious work has destabilized Shakespeare studies, and Shakespeare is now less taught and less well thought of as a result. My main hope is that we will allow ourselves to like Shakespeare again intellectually and institutionally. Through more productive and innovative global exchanges and global performances, my hope is that, collectively, we can use Shakespeare's legacy to create productive international conversations and perhaps even—directly or subversively—to bring about positive change.

CONTRIBUTORS

Tiffany Stern is Professor of Shakespeare and Early Modern Drama at The Shakespeare Institute, University of Birmingham, having previously been Professor of Early Modern Drama at Oxford University. Her PhD is from Cambridge University. She has published fifteen books, the main ones being *Rehearsal from Shakespeare to Sheridan* (2000), *Making Shakespeare* (2004), *Shakespeare in Parts* (with Simon Palfrey, 2007), *Documents of Performance in Early Modern England* (2009), *Shakespeare, Malone and the Problems of Chronology* (2023), and *Ballad Business: Selling Early Modern Theatre* (2026). Her chapters and articles are on literary criticism, editing, theatre history and book history. Previously general editor of New Mermaids and the Norton Anthology of English Literature: Sixteenth Century, she is currently general editor of Arden Shakespeare: Fourth Series. In 2019 she was elected Fellow of the British Academy.

Min-Hua Wu (**吳敏華**) is Professor and Chair of the Department of English at National Chengchi University, Taipei, where he previously served as Associate Vice President for the Office of International Cooperation. He earned his PhD in English Literature from Paris-Sorbonne University with full funding from a Taiwan government scholarship. A scholar of Shakespearean adaptation, translation studies, and comparative literature, he has received multiple national translation awards, including three National Taiwan University Chinese–English Literary Translation Awards and three Liang Shih-ch'iu Literary Awards. His work has appeared in *Multicultural Shakespeare*, *The Translator*, *Brontë Studies*, *The Emily Dickinson Journal*, *Concentric*, and *The Wenshan Review*, among others. He co-authored *Chang Pao Chun Chiu: Li Ao's Landscape of Lettres* (Ink Publishing) and co-edited a special issue on "Lyrical Translation and the Translator's Subjectivity" with Paula Varsano (UC Berkeley). He has served as Editor-in-Chief of *The Wenshan Review* and Vice President of the Taiwan Shakespeare Association (2023–2025), and was recently elected President of the Taiwan Shakespeare Association (2025–2027).