

The Shakespeare Club of Stratford-upon-Avon

The 884th meeting of the Shakespeare Club took place at Mason Croft on Tuesday 11 February 2014. The meeting was chaired by Dr Susan Brock who introduced the speaker for the evening, Dr Erin Sullivan, Fellow of the Shakespeare Institute. Her talk was entitled *Beyond Melancholy: Sadness and Selfhood in Renaissance England*'.

Referring to the anthropological studies of Paul Ekman on emotion and facial expression, Dr Sullivan asked how far emotion was universal and how far it changed through time and in context. She considered Shakespeare's portrayal of sadness in the character of Antonio in *The Merchant of Venice*. She examined the key line 'In sooth, I know not why I am so sad' but explained that in the time of England's Renaissance - and also perhaps more than we realize in our own - what sadness might mean to a thinker, writer, or sufferer was by no means a straightforward matter. Ranging widely across art, literature, theology, philosophy and medicine, Dr Sullivan explored the distinctive ways in which writers of the time defined sadness, very often using it as a means to explore broader questions about the nature of the self and its relationship to the wider world. Of particular interest was the idea that melancholy was a key to genius first proposed by Aristotle.

Dr Sullivan talked about the etymology of the word 'sad' and defined types of sadness and melancholy. She showed how they linked to concepts of the soul and were related to ideas about the four humours and the four seasons, highlighting the multiple varieties of emotional experience linked to sadness in this period (including grief, godly sorrow, and despair), as well as the different kinds of spiritual and material effects they were believed to produce. The talk provided a valuable introduction to the philosophical culture within which Shakespeare worked.

Following questions the meeting closed at 9.00 pm.