

**Distinguished International Visiting Fellowship 2014
Richard Strier
'The Status of Emotions in Shakespeare's Tragedies'**



As part of its international research collaboration, the ARC Centre of Excellence for the History of Emotions funds outstanding international scholars in the field to visit one or more of the Australian nodes for a period of between four weeks and two months, to work with members of the Centre on a research program of their choice. Visitors are invited to present their work in lectures or symposia, where they will receive feedback from and engage in discussion with members of the Centre, promoting collaborative research.

Richard Strier is based at the University of Chicago, and travelled to Australia to undertake a Distinguished International Visiting Fellowship with the Centre in January 2014. He spent 8 weeks at CHE, sharing his time between the nodes at Melbourne, Sydney, and Brisbane.

Richard's passion is to bring together two modes of literary study that have, traditionally but needlessly, been seen as antagonistic: formalism and historicism. He is deeply interested in the intellectual history of the early modern period, especially theological and political ideas. He's fascinated by the ideas themselves, but even more by the ways in which they find their way into English and American literature in the period. His book on George Herbert attempts to demonstrate how deeply the central ideas of Reformation theology are at work in the intricate tonal and structural details of the lyrics. Richard's next book, *Resistant Structures*, brings together methodological and historical concerns. It critiques and tries to work free of various critical and historical schemes and presuppositions; it refuses to idealize "devout humanism" and it refuses to see the thought-world of early modern England as fundamentally conservative and deferential to authority. Richard demonstrates the presence of resistance to authority in works by Donne (*Satire 3*), Shakespeare (*King Lear*), and, in the Restoration period, Nahum Tate (in his adaptation of *Lear*). His new book, *The Unrepentant Renaissance from Petrarch to Shakespeare to Milton*, continues the endeavours of historical and intellectual revision,

including chapters on text from the whole Renaissance period that praise such things as passion, impatience, worldliness, and pride.

Richard comments on his experience as a Visiting Fellow with CHE below.

I had a wonderful time as an international visitor to the ARC Centre of Excellence for the History of Emotions. I visited Centre nodes in Melbourne and Sydney, where I presented a paper on Shakespeare and emotions, and in Brisbane, where I chaired two full-day seminars.

The Melbourne node, where I presented a paper entitled "Mind, Nature, Heterodoxy, and Iconoclasm in *The Winter's Tale*", was especially lively. We had an excellent discussion, focusing particularly on religious issues and on the way things could be said and explored on stage that could not easily be explored in other places in the culture; as well as on the particular social and political issues in *The Winter's Tale*. I profited greatly from this conversation and feel that the other participants did as well. In Sydney, my paper was paired with that of a visiting Art Historian, working on conduct literature for French queens in the late 15th century and early 16th. There was no pre-concerted plan for bringing the papers together, but the result was an extremely interesting discussion about the reality and representation of strong women in the period (from the late 15th to the early 17th century). *The Winter's Tale* features a slandered queen, who eloquently defends herself, and a powerful and eloquent lady-in-waiting. That discussion also focused productively on issues of scepticism.

In Brisbane, at the University of Queensland, where my sponsor Peter Holbrook is based, I met with some graduate students and post-docs, but my primary activity there was to lead two day-long seminars, on successive days, on the topic of "Tragedy and Emotion in Shakespeare." The first day focused on *King Lear*, the second on *Othello*. The group consisted of 20 participants (not counting Peter and myself), most of them being Australian faculty and post-docs, but other participants coming from Bali and China. My goal in the seminar was to see whether we could work out an alternative to the idea that Shakespearean tragedy -- and perhaps tragedy in general -- is fundamentally a warning against the dangers of powerful emotions. We read a critical text that puts forth this view persuasively -- Lily Bess Campbell's *Shakespeare's Tragic Heroes: Slaves of Passion* -- in order to see what we might add to this, or how we might modify it. Some of the first day was devoted to discussion of the two texts of *Lear* (quarto and folio), with special attention to how the two texts differ in their presentation of emotion or passion (the quarto is more lyrical, and leaves more room for righteous indignation; the folio is more brutal). We spent some time, as all serious discussions of *Lear* must, on the first scene, and what motivates Cordelia's behaviour in the love-test and Lear's in initiating it. The discussions were serious and fruitful, and the various participants were able to bring to bear their own specialized knowledge on the topics on hand.

In the second day's seminar, on *Othello*, I was assisted by Graham Bradshaw, who began the discussion with some of his own thoughts on how to read the play, focusing on the imagery in a key passage. With regard to *Othello*, the classical text that I asked the group to read for the seminar, Seneca's treatise *On Anger (De Ira)*, turned out to be surprisingly useful (I had initially thought of it in relation to *Lear*). Seneca, as we all recognized, holds the view that emotions are voluntary, that the person who is moved in a certain direction by an impulse has to decide to give in to the impulse for the full-bore

emotion to develop. The sage cannot prevent the impulses, but can withhold commitment to them. This seemed deeply relevant to jealousy in *Othello*, where we watch, in slow motion, Othello being stimulated to have the impulse and then coming to commit himself to it. The sense that this sort of commitment to an emotion or passion is not inevitable, and is a conscious step, was very useful in our collective reading of the play. Whether Othello's character is ruined by his passion, or remains in some sense heroic through it, was seriously discussed, if not definitively answered (since it's not the sort of question that can be answered in an unequivocal way). Again, this was a discussion that was both wide-ranging and fruitful.

Overall, the seminars allowed for really intense and developing discussions, and helped to form significant scholarly and personal connections, which promise to develop well into the future. Finally, let me mention that Peter Holbrook was a superb, stimulating, and generous host.