

International Visiting Fellowship 2017

Richard Meek

**‘The Relativity of Sorrows: Sympathy in
Early Modern Literature and Culture, c.1580–1640’**



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 Meek was awarded an International Visiting Fellowship in 2017. He spent three weeks working with the Centre at The University of Western Australia.

Richard Meek is Lecturer in English at The University of Hull, UK. His monograph, *Narrating the Visual in Shakespeare*, was published by Ashgate in 2009. He is currently completing a book on sympathy in early modern literature and culture, provisionally titled *The Relativity of Sorrows*. He has edited several collections of essays on Shakespeare and early modern literature, including, with Erin Sullivan, *The Renaissance of Emotion: Understanding Affect in Shakespeare and His Contemporaries* (Manchester University Press, 2015).

Richard discusses the benefits and highlights of his time with CHE, below.

In March and April 2017 I was the fortunate recipient of a CHE International Visiting Research Fellowship, and visited the Centre's nodes in Perth and Sydney. This was an especially propitious time to visit Perth, not simply because of the glorious weather but because there were two other CHE International Research Fellows visiting at the same time: Kevin Curran (University of Lausanne) and Naya Tsentourou (University of Exeter). I had met Kevin and Naya before at other conferences, and Bob White had suggested that the three of us should try to coordinate our visits. Happily there were several days of overlap at UWA, which meant that we were able to take part in an event that brought together our interests in early modern emotions. I believe it was my suggestion that we should hold a symposium on *Hamlet* – an especially rich text in terms of its concern with the passions – and a play that all of us are interested in. Together with Kathryn Prince (University of Ottawa), who was also visiting Perth at the time, we became the four keynote speakers at a two-day symposium on 'Hamlet and Emotions: Then and Now' (10–11 April 2017). I have to say that it was one of the most enjoyable and interesting conferences I have participated in, and extremely useful for my own research. I had written about *Hamlet* in my previous book, *Narrating the Visual in Shakespeare* (Ashgate, 2009), but knew there was more I wanted to say about *Hamlet* and emotions and, specifically, sympathy – the topic of my current research project.

My current project is titled 'Sympathy in Early Modern Literature and Culture'. As the title suggests, it explores representations of sympathy in early modern culture, c.1580–1640. It also seeks to offer a new history of the word 'sympathy', and the range of meanings that the word and its derivatives had in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Of course, the received scholarly wisdom is that the crucial period for the development of sympathy was the eighteenth century, with the appearance of key philosophical works by David Hume and Adam Smith. However, I argue that the term 'sympathy' was used to refer to an active and imaginative sharing of affect considerably earlier than previous critical and historical accounts have suggested. In the mid-1580s, writers of poetry and prose fiction began using the term to denote an exchange of woe; similarly, preachers began to use 'sympathy' to refer to a mutual suffering between the individual members of a church. My project is especially interested in early modern drama, and explores plays including Christopher Marlowe's *Dido, Queen of Carthage* (c.1585–1586), Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* (c.1587) and Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* (c.1594), which describes a 'sympathy of woe' (3.1) between its tragic characters.

I knew that *Hamlet* was interested in sympathy, not least in Hamlet's remarkable response to the Player's speech in Act 2 and his desire to imitate, or even emulate, the emotions of other characters. My first week in Perth was spent researching these ideas and completing my conference paper. I became especially interested in pictorial or visual metaphors in the period, and how they were used to describe the relationship between two selves – often in the context of a mirroring of emotions. Perhaps the most striking example is Hamlet's comment about Laertes's predicament: 'For by the image of my cause, I see / The portraiture of his' (5.2). This statement became the title and starting point of my paper, and got me thinking about the complex ways in which Renaissance writers describe inter-subjectivity and fellow-feeling – not as a humoral process (as some have maintained) but as an imaginative activity that is often bound up with projection and self-recognition. This is an issue that I hope to address in detail in my monograph, so thinking about these questions during my CHE fellowship was very fruitful and beneficial to my project as a whole.

It is also worth emphasising how convivial, generous and welcoming we found the Perth node of CHE. Happily, I was able to visit Australia with my partner, Jane Rickard, who also gave a paper at the *Hamlet* conference. Pam Bond and her colleagues made us feel extremely welcome and well looked after, providing us with the necessary facilities and resources with great care and professionalism. It was also very enjoyable to meet and discuss emotional matters with other academics from the Perth node, including Michael Barbezat, Paul Gibbard, Kirk Essary, Andrew Lynch, Paul Megna and Bríd Philips. The symposium itself, as I have suggested, was a stimulating and thought-provoking event, which demonstrated that it is certainly possible to hold an academic conference on a single text. All of the papers had something interesting to offer and spoke to each other well. I would like to thank Paul Megna and Bob White for organising the event and for creating such a pleasant and productive atmosphere. I have recently completed a chapter based on my paper for inclusion in a collection of essays emerging from the conference and I very much look forward to seeing the collection in print.

Following our visit to Perth, we travelled to Sydney, where we spent some time at the CHE node there. This included working on various parts of my current book project, and giving a seminar presentation. My paper, 'The Relativity of Sorrows: Shakespeare, Sympathy and Early Modern Culture' (13 April 2017), offered an overview of my sympathy project and looked in particular at Shakespeare's *The Rape of Lucrece* and its reception in the late Elizabethan period. It was particularly good to meet Juanita Ruys, who also has interests in sympathy and empathy, as well as Umberto Grassi and Liam Semler, who attended my paper and gave me some very useful feedback.

Overall my fellowship was a valuable, stimulating and very positive experience: it was an excellent opportunity to forge new scholarly relationships and friendships across the international history of emotions community. It was also very good to meet up once again with several colleagues from UWA at the recent 'Powerful Emotions/Emotions and Power, c.400–1850' conference at the University of York in the UK (28–29 June 2017), and I hope that there will be many more chances to work with the scholars we met at CHE in the future.