

The UQ Node, ARC Centre of Excellence for the History of Emotions, Europe 1100 - 1800 presents

"SHAKESPEARE'S FREETOWN: WHY THE PLAYS MATTER"

PROFESSOR EWAN FERNIE

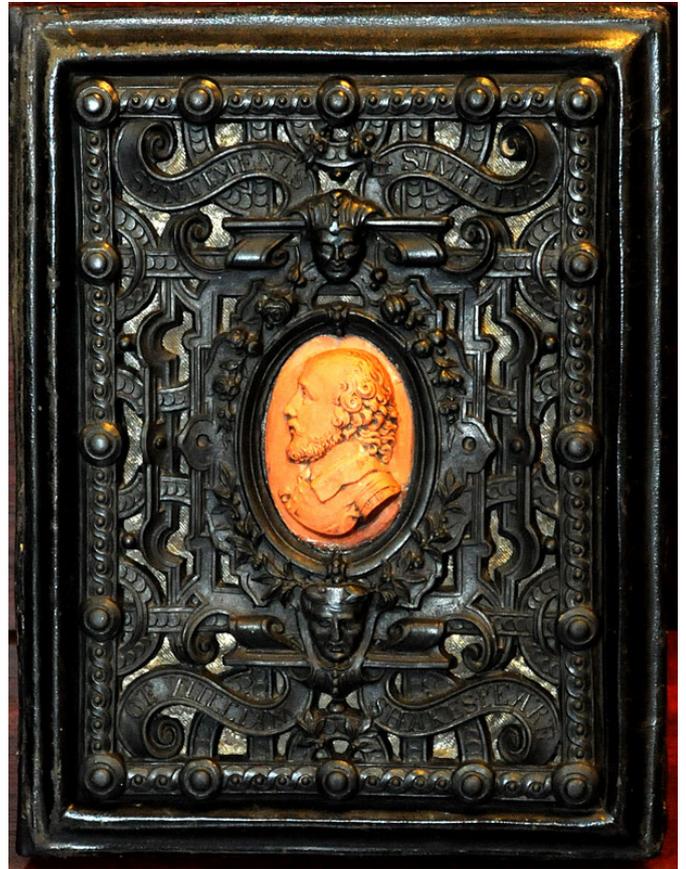
Shakespeare Institute, University of Birmingham

Date: Thursday, 23 April, 2015
 Time: 4:00 pm
 Location: Room 275, Global Change Institute
 (Bldg 20), UQ St Lucia campus
 RSVP: uqche@uq.edu.au (07) 3365-4913
 by Friday 17 April
 All welcome, reception to follow

What good is Shakespeare?

The proliferation and specialization of Shakespeare studies tends to have the unfortunate effect that we neglect the big question of why we bother with him at all. One of the great merits of Jonathan Bate's *The Genius of Shakespeare* was that it directly faced up to this question, but Bate's book is nearly twenty years old now and we need to renew its effort. After the World Shakespeare Festival that was central to the Cultural Olympiad of 2012, and then the four-hundred-and-fiftieth birthday celebrations of 2014, and what with 2016's four-hundredth anniversary of the playwright's death rapidly approaching, there is a real and frankly reasonable danger of everybody without a vested interest in the playwright simply getting sick of him. And there's no logical reason why that sickness shouldn't prove terminal, why Shakespeare shouldn't finally begin to die off in human culture. If Shakespeare matters - or rather, *still* matters - then in this context especially, we need a better, more accessible and powerful reason why he matters than the 'aspectuality' and 'performativity' which Bate ultimately comes up with. Of course there is truth in what Bate says, but 'aspectuality' and 'performativity' will not by themselves explain the poetry and reality of what Shakespeare has, in the past, given human life; nor by themselves will they explain why we should continue to lavish such disproportionate attention on a long-dead dramatic poet from Warwickshire.

Ewan Fernie's paper will argue for a better reason to read, perform and celebrate Shakespeare. It will argue that Shakespeare means freedom. Fernie will sketch a distinctively Shakespearean vision of freedom, homing in on a rich speech from *Antony and Cleopatra*. But he will argue that Shakespearean drama can't ultimately be seen as a hymn to purely individual liberty. Shakespearean freedom is never forged in isolation; it is made in interaction. In short, it is always *political*.



Embossed edition of Shakespeare, National Széchényi Library, Budapest

Ewan Fernie is Chair, Professor and Fellow at the Shakespeare Institute, University of Birmingham, Stratford-upon-Avon, where he co-convenes the pioneering MA in Shakespeare and Creativity and helps run the collaboration with the RSC at The Other Place. He is General Editor (with Simon Palfrey) of the *Shakespeare Now!* series, and his latest critical book is *The Demonic: Literature and Experience*. Fernie also writes creatively. He led the AHRC grant-winning project which culminated in *Redcrosse*, a new poetic liturgy for St George's Day that was performed in major UK cathedrals and by the RSC, and published in 2012. He is currently completing a *Macbeth* novel (also with Palfrey), and beginning to develop a play with Katharine Craik and the RSC called *Marina*, as well as seeing through the press a volume of essays edited with Tobias Döring on Shakespeare and Thomas Mann. Fernie's present critical project is a book entitled *Shakespeare's Freetown: Why the Plays Matter*. But he also has a developing interest in the part played by Shakespeare in the nineteenth-century reformation of industrial Birmingham, and in particular in the work and life of the radical preacher and lecturer George Dawson.