

## Erin Sullivan on history of the emotions

Dr Erin Sullivan of the Shakespeare Institute discusses her research into the history of the emotions.

Title: [History of the emotions \(/schools/edacs/departments/shakespeare/research/videos/sullivan-erin-research.aspx\)](#)

Duration: 2.46 mins

My name is Erin Sullivan and I'm a lecturer here at the Shakespeare Institute.

I'm engaged in teaching with the students and also in working on my own research that has to do with Shakespeare's life and times.

The main interest that I've been exploring over the past few years is the history of the emotions - or the passions as they were called in Shakespeare's time. I'm interested in the ways that people understood what the passions were, how they came to be in the body, what their uses or maybe their dangers might be, and in my exploration of the subject I focus specifically on the passion or emotion of sadness, largely because there are so many different kinds of opinions on what sadness is, and whether or not it's a good or useful thing.

So for instance, if you look at a lot of medical literature from the period, you find that all the passions, but especially sadness - are warned against. There's this feeling that if you allow yourself to become too excessively sorrowful it's going to hurt not just - it's not just going to make your life more difficult, but it's actually going to hurt your body - it's going to throw your organs into disarray, it's going to create too much black bile in the blood, and if you truly - if you sorrow so excessively that you really can't go on with your life there was a belief that it could literally break your heart and kill you.

So on the one hand there's this very negative understanding of what something like sadness can do, but on the other if you look at a lot of religious literature from the period, you find that there's a very different attitude towards the uses of the passions and especially sadness.

A lot of this I argue has to do with the changing nature of religious, theology belief in the period.

So with the Protestant Reformation there's this fear and emphasis on demonstrating faith and religious commitment through individual interior experiences and I argue that the passions are one of the main ways to do this and so sorrow especially becomes very important in terms of demonstrating that someone is elect to heaven.

I'm interested in how the different people in Shakespeare's time negotiate between these two very different poles and in relation Shakespeare's plays I'm interested how some of these ideas get pulled in, questioned, queried, reworked - so in plays that aren't necessarily explicitly religious or medical but still draw on these ideas - plays like Hamlet, or Richard II or As you Like It or also plays by Shakespeare's contemporaries - I'm interested in seeing how they negotiate some of these different ideas and how they may answer their own philosophical arguments into the debate.