The Shakespeare Club of Stratford-upon-Avon

The 892nd meeting of the Shakespeare Club took place at Mason Croft on Tuesday 10th February 2015. Dr Paul Prescott chaired and introduced Professor Eugene Giddens, who spoke on 'Amicability in Jonson and Shakespeare*.*

Professor Giddens began with Ben Jonson's words about Shakespeare -- publicly in his prefatory poem to the First Folio of 1623 'To draw no envy, Shakespeare, to thy name,/ Am I thus ample to thy book and fame…' and in his commonplace book, *Discoveries,* printed posthumously in 1640, and privately in his talk and correspondence with his friend William Drummond of Hawthornden. Jonson's judgements on Shakespeare could seem mean-minded and coloured by envy, indeed the inequalities between Shakespeare's prosperous and successful life and Jonson's isolated and impecunious last years might have been a cause of jealousy. However Professor Giddens argued that Jonson's concept of friendship, or amicability, included the freedom to speak the truth about a friend, though the sharing of good conversation, food and drink were among his personal criteria.

Shakespeare, on the other hand, in his plays showed many different kinds of friendship: based on the exchange of money or gifts, the sharing of meals, physical defence, the keeping of secrets, and was normally the preserve of the upper classes. A search for the word 'friend' in the plays turned up 500 occurrences with the greatest density, surprisingly, in the tragedies, especially the Roman plays. *Timon of Athens* was Shakespeare's ultimate friendship play but it was a bitter experience. Looking at *Coriolanus, Julius Caesar, Richard III, Merchant of Venice* among others Professor Giddens asked Did Shakespeare ever portray a healthy friendship? He concluded that the playwright did not seem to have a consistent and overarching theory of friendship like Jonson's.

After a lively discussion, the meeting closed at 8.50 when members retired to the conservatory for refreshments.