

THE SHAKESPEARE CLUB OF STRATFORD UPON AVON

The 859th meeting of the Shakespeare Club, held on 11 January 2001, at Mason Croft was chaired by Dr Susan Brock, who welcomed Dr Robert Smallwood, Honorary Fellow of the Shakespeare Institute and formerly Head of Education at the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust. His talk, titled "Hooted at like an old tale ...": Narrative and Theatre in Some of Shakespeare's Plays' began with the question 'Was Shakespeare interested in story-telling?' Dr Smallwood likened Shakespeare's stories to the thread on which the pearls hang in a necklace and Shakespeare's scenes to the pearls. The jeweller, he argued, is not primarily interested in the thread. Quoting George Bernard Shaw, he proposed that Shakespeare found that what paid in the theatre was romantic nonsense and so he decided to borrow stories on which to hang this nonsense. In *As You Like It*, for example, most of the story is told in Act 1. Its brilliance is independent from the narrative.

Dr Smallwood argued that it is in the history plays where we see Shakespeare as the dramatic storyteller. In fact some of the plays like *Henry VI* had too much story and the most successful, *Richard III* for example, covered only a few years. He agreed with Thornton Wilder that 'a novel is what took place but on the stage is always now'. The highpoint of all ten of Shakespeare's history plays was Falstaff, whose point was to resist the process of change to stay in the 'now'. Dr Smallwood considered the Roman plays, *Hamlet*, the three plays which Shakespeare made up: *Love's Labour's Lost*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Tempest*, finally turning to the romances: *Winter's Tale*, *Pericles*, *Cymbeline* and *Troilus and Cressida*. He showed how Shakespeare used plot devices, like the characters of Time and Gower, to move the plots along and often achieved emotional power negating unbelievable complexity in plotting, concluding that Shakespeare's plays were above and beyond story.

After questions the meeting closed at 9pm and was followed by refreshments.