

Shakespeare Club of Stratford-upon-Avon

The 899th meeting of the Shakespeare Club took place at Mason Croft on Tuesday 12 January 2016. Ms Mary Reardon took the chair and introduced Dr Will Sharpe, one of the editors of the RSC edition of Shakespeare's collaborative plays, who spoke on 'Shakespeare Collaboration and Dramatic Authorship: The case of *Sir Thomas More*'.

Sir Thomas More was a complex case, Dr Sharpe argued, though it was the play in the RSC edition that was most likely to include a bit of Shakespeare. The number of plays in which Shakespeare is thought to have collaborated was slim which indicated that this style of composition was low on his agenda, nor were they the most popular in the canon. What were Shakespeare's motives for collaboration? As a shareholder in the King's Men he was not in need of the money like the teams of writers working together to churn out plays for Philip Henslowe at the Rose Theatre. Sharpe acknowledged that Shakespeare was a slow and solitary writer though in a twenty-year career he managed to produce annually two or three plays of 3000 lines each.

The only version of *Sir Thomas More* that survived – in manuscript-- was likely to date to about 1604. It contained a section which had been identified as in Shakespeare's handwriting and so provided profound insights but also great difficulties. The document mainly written by Anthony Munday, contained the hands of up to five others including Thomas Heywood, Thomas Dekker, Henry Chettle and Shakespeare, who revised the play in response to instructions from the Master of the Revels who had refused a licence to stage the play three to four years before. Dr Sharpe examined the reasons why the play, probably first written in 1600, was rejected. Its subject matter was the public riots against foreigners more than eighty years before in the reign of Henry VIII and the rise and fall of Sir Thomas More, Under-Sheriff of London and then Chancellor, possibly a topic too sensitive for public consumption during the reign of Henry's daughter. After James I came to the throne it might have seemed safe to revive the project.

More's speech quelling the rioters, had been identified as Shakespeare's contribution, by the comparison of pause patterns and word collocations with his known plays, of handwriting and spelling. Dr Sharpe compared it with the rhetoric of orators dealing with unruly mobs in *Coriolanus* and *Julius Caesar* but argued that other parts of *Thomas More* had merit too and that, looking just at Shakespeare's lines had the same value as responding to *Romeo and Juliet* as if Shakespeare had written only the balcony scene. Was Shakespeare called in because he was good at crowd scenes? Dr Sharpe concluded by remembering that Shakespeare's well-spring of creativity was in his own person but that the perception of Shakespeare's gift as a writer was expanded by his collaborations. Shakespeare was both the authorial craftsman and collaborator.

After many questions the meeting ended at 9.05pm.