

Shakespeare Club of Stratford-upon-Avon

The 919th meeting of the Shakespeare Club took place on Tuesday 9 October 2018 following the Club's AGM. The speaker was Dr David Fallow, who spoke on "The Exhumation of Rotted Corpses". The meeting was chaired by Mary Reardon.

Dr Fallow began by commenting on recent press reports relating to the poet's father, the subject of his talk in February 2016. A series of legal documents has been discovered in the National Archives shedding light on John Shakespeare's business dealings. While some believe they confirm his financial collapse, Dr Fallow argued that they support his theory that he was not ruined, as "there is no point suing somebody with no money".

He then spoke about his current research into legal documentation relating to death and burial. He took two examples from Hamlet: the drowning of Ophelia, and the Gravediggers' scene, considering both in the context of the time. Drowning, Ophelia's fate, was very common, accounting for 40% of accidental deaths. A study of legal documents has revealed several examples in Stratford during Shakespeare's lifetime, in particular that of the aptly-named Kathryn Hamlet. Suicide always had to be considered. If signs of suicidal intent were found bodies would be buried in unconsecrated ground, while their goods and chattels passed to the crown. As a prominent townsman John Shakespeare would have heard these cases.

The Gravediggers in the play are "clowns", but Shakespeare's fools and clowns speak the truth. They use legal language when discussing Ophelia's death, questioning the Coroner's decision that it was not suicide. Documentation confirms this is not unlikely, as gravediggers had to report anything suspicious during a burial, and had to disinter newly-buried bodies. We might be squeamish about the Gravediggers' scene, but Shakespeare's contemporaries would have been more matter of fact.

Dr Fallow closed his talk by refuting the suggestion that Shakespeare must have trained in law in order to write accurately about legal procedures. He lived in a litigious society where many people used legal language, and William could have easily learned this from his own father.

After many questions and comments the meeting closed at 9pm.