

Shakespeare Club of Stratford-upon-Avon

The 920th meeting of the Shakespeare Club took place on Tuesday 13 November 2018. The speaker was David M Howe, who spoke on "Shakespeare and Comedy: are his themes still topical?". The meeting was chaired by Janel Anslow.

Mr Howe began by considering what kind of human weaknesses Shakespeare made his comedy from.

The main one is ambition. When people want to rise in the social pecking order, they become vulnerable to being made figures of fun. The best example in the comedies is Malvolio in *Twelfth Night*. But is being ambitious intrinsically funny? He noted that it is also a feature of Shakespeare's tragedies. To begin with Richard III's ambition makes him funny and charismatic, but in time his violence alienates the audience.

Ambition can make Shakespeare's characters misunderstand situations. His lack of self-awareness does not itself make the audience dislike Malvolio, but he loses their sympathy when he is unpleasant to other characters. Is his mockery at the end of *Twelfth Night* what he deserves, or just cruel?

The speaker drew parallels with TV sitcoms, which often featured a young man with ambition and a cynical older one who makes fun of them, such as Rodney and Del Boy in *Only Fools and Horses* and *Steptoe and Son*.

Snobbery is also exploited by Shakespeare in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, and sitcoms such as *Fawlty Towers* and *The Good Life* both made comedy from the British obsession with social position.

The speaker went on to consider Shakespeare's language and jokes. Audiences often no longer laugh at Shakespeare's jokes, either because of changes in pronunciation or because he was satirising contemporary people and events, as the current TV programme *Have I Got News For You* does. Gilbert and Sullivan's Savoy Operas were extremely topical in their day but soon dated when they were fixed in stone by D'Oyly Carte. Perhaps there is a case for updating Shakespeare's comedies.

After questions and comments the meeting closed at 9pm.